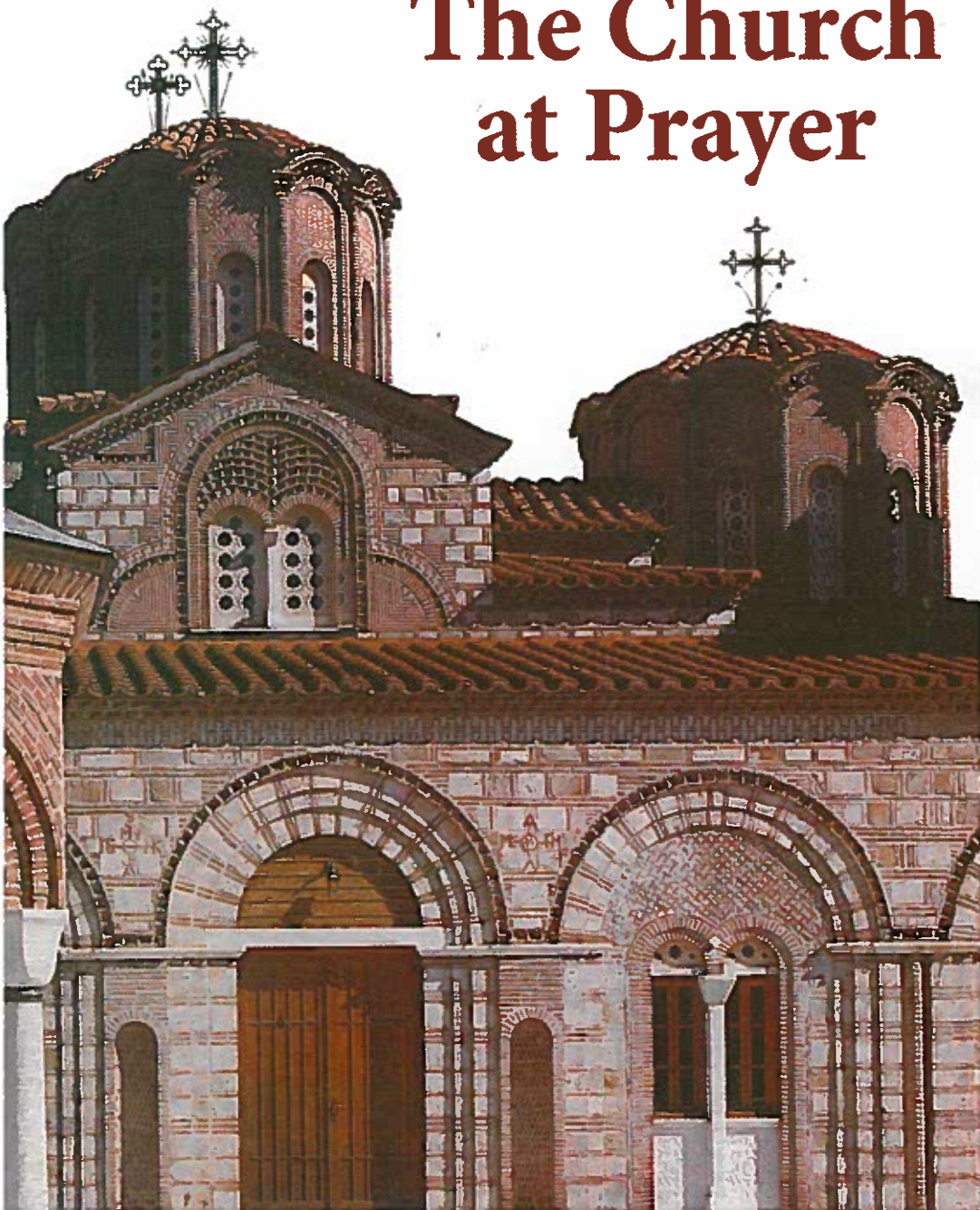


Archimandrite  
Aimilianos of Simonopetra

# The Church at Prayer



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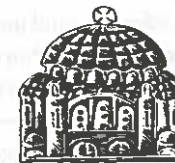
Ἀπαρχὴ Χριστός, μεσότης καὶ τελειότης· ἐν πᾶσι γὰρ ὁ ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις, ἐν τε τοῖς μέσοις καὶ τελευταίοις ὡς ἐν τοῖς πρώτοις ἐστίν· τὰ πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσι Χριστός.

*Christ is the beginning, the middle, and the end. He Who is in the first is in all, and as He is in the first so He is in the middle and the end as well—Christ is all and in all.*

St. Symeon the New Theologian (*Chapters 3.1*)

# THE CHURCH AT PRAYER

*Edited and annotated by*  
The Holy Convent  
of the Annunciation, Ormylia



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## Publisher's note

Many readers of the addresses of Elder Aimilianos, which have been published in the five-volume series, *Archimandrite Aimilianos, Spiritual Instructions and Discourses* (Ormylia, 1998-2003), have frequently expressed the wish for an abridged and more accessible form of his teaching. In response, we are happy to inaugurate a new series of publications incorporating key texts from the above-mentioned collection. Other considerations have also contributed to this new project, such as the selection of specific texts which address important, contemporary questions; the need for a smaller, more reader-friendly publication format; and the necessity for editing certain passages in need of clarification, without however altering their basic meaning.

Above all, the works collected in this volume reflect the importance which the Elder consistently attached to prayer, spirituality, community life, worship, and liturgy. Thus the experientially based works "On Prayer", and "The Prayer of the Holy Mountain", which deal primarily with the Prayer of the Heart, appear first, followed by the summary addresses on "The Divine Liturgy", and "Our Church Attendance". These are in turn followed by the more socially oriented discourses on "Our Relations with Our Neighbor", and "Marriage: The Great Sacrament". Finally, the present volume closes with the sermons on "Spiritual Reading" and "The Spiritual Life", which in a simple and yet compelling manner set forth the conditions for "ascending to heaven on the wings of the Spirit".

It is our hope that *The Church at Prayer* will meet the purpose for which it is issued and will serve as a ready aid and support for those who desire God and eternal life in Him.



## ON PRAYER<sup>1</sup>

Today we will consider one of the principal aspects of the spiritual life, to which we are introduced by the Triodion as a whole, but in particular by this initial period of Lent, namely: the subject of prayer.

Do we really know what prayer is, and do we know how to pray? From the time we were little children we learned to say our prayers, but has our prayer life subsequently followed its proper course? Prayer is the journey of the soul toward God, the purpose being to reach him and be united with him. If a car or a ship is going the wrong way, it will never reach its destination. If the soul at prayer is not going the right way, you understand that it will never reach God. It would be like being in a boat, with the boatman pulling wrongly on the oars, and in the end accomplishing nothing except to go in circles around the same point. The same thing can happen to us, without our even knowing it. What we must therefore look at is whether or not our prayer is successful.

You know that people who do not know how to pray are, in reality, good for nothing. There's no chance that they will succeed in life. Even if they are monks, they will remain earthly people and never become heavenly; they will never become angels, because they do not know how to read the map or navigate the ship of prayer.

As you yourselves feel, the harm that befalls us if we do not know how to pray is incalculable. Incalculable! It is the only harm from which we suffer. There is no catastrophe that can compare with it. If all the stars and all the planets were to collide with one another, and the universe to shatter into smithereens, the damage would be far less than that which befalls us if we don't know how to pray. It follows then that, where there is spiritual ignorance, we are in immediate and definitive danger.

What is prayer? It is, as we have said, the vehicle of the soul. We might also say that it is the atmosphere in which the soul lives. You know how our lungs breathe air? In the same way our souls breathe

<sup>1</sup> A Catechism given at the Sacred Monastery of Simonos Petras, 4 February, 1974.

with prayer. And why, after all, did we come to the monastery? Precisely because the monastery is the atmosphere of prayer. Everything here exists for the sake of prayer. If, then, we do not pray, or if our prayer is wrong, how will it be possible for us to arrive at our destination, indeed to become spiritual people? But when prayer is right you feel it setting everything in order, overcoming every difficulty, solving all our problems, removing our worries, our sins, arranging all things properly. Prayer can, moreover, work wonders, performing miracles throughout our journey, that is, in our struggle and in our lives.

If we do not have the wealth of the Spirit within us, a wealth of joy, a wealth of peace; if we do not have fruit which is immediately perceptible, obvious, and great, it is because we lack the desire for them, or because we simply do not know how to pray. And if you do desire these things, you nevertheless "desire and do not have them"—as St. James, the Brother of Our Lord, so aptly puts it—because "you do not ask for them" (Jas 4.2). And if we do desire, we do so badly, because we "ask badly", as the same Apostle says (Jas 4.3).

For monks, the most appropriate prayer is the prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer, the "one-word" prayer, as we might call it, with which we will be especially concerned throughout Great Lent. Today's instruction will be by way of an introduction. Before entering into the details and examine the principles and foundations of the prayer of the heart, let us first say a few things about prayer in general. Because prayer is everything. But if I do not know how to pray, I accomplish nothing, as I have told you, and everything suffers complete destruction. Self-destruction.

Permit me, before continuing, to add something further. It seems to me, my fathers and brothers, that we do not really pray, or if we do, we don't pray enough. And even the little that we do pray is without skill, without strength, without inspiration, and, above all, without Spirit. Because it is only when the Spirit "prays within us" (Rom 8.26) that it is possible for our prayer to rise up to heaven. Because prayer is "in the Spirit" (Jn 4.24), and the Spirit comprehends spirit, and unites itself with spirit, and not with flesh. But our prayer does not have the strength and the presence of the Spirit. Instead, our souls are more often attracted by, or preoccupied with, other things, which are of more importance to us today, and in the end we forget that to be a monk means to be a man at prayer.

What, then, is prayer? Today we must say how prayer comes about, so that we might be able to begin an actual, concrete struggle. For those of us who came from Meteora, this is of great importance, for we left our home there precisely because it lacked the conditions and opportunities for the spiritual development of our souls, because we were being hindered in prayer. And though we desired it so much, you remember that in the end we stopped talking, because we had so many difficulties simply in being able to pray.

But now we have come to the Holy Mountain, and thus we have no excuse for not praying, and indeed, for not praying intensely. Our flight from Meteora, and our entry onto the Holy Mountain, will have absolutely no meaning if we are not persons truly praying in the Holy Spirit. Our coming to the Holy Mountain will have been an act of deception to the world, and an illusion and fraud before God, unless we become intensely prayerful people. For this reason I ask that you pay particular attention to the subject which concerns us.

First of all, in speaking of prayer, we must say that prayer is not something that stands on its own. As we have said so many times, I cannot say "I pray" if my prayer is not connected to something else. There are some things which always go together. You can't separate the one from the other. When, for example, the Apostle Paul speaks of "faith" (i.e., in Rom 4.3) he speaks only of faith, and not of works. Why? Because when he says "faith", he means a belief in God which exists and is manifested through works. When, on the other hand, James speaks of "works" (Jas 2.14-16), he says that faith has no meaning without them. He is constantly talking about works. Why? Because works are the proof of faith. So faith and works are completely bound up with one another.

The same sort of connection exists with respect to many other things as well. And thus prayer, as we have said, is linked to something else, namely, our worship and especially with Holy Communion. If there is no worship and no Holy Communion, there can be no prayer. Any prayer uttered apart from them is false. If, on the other hand, there is worship divorced from intense, spiritual prayer—internal, powerful prayer which cries out—you can be certain that our worship and our Holy Communion is in vain: an attempt to deceive God by throwing mud in his eyes, pretending that we love him, when in fact we have no



relationship with him whatsoever. One day he will say to us: "I do not know you" (Mt 25.12; Lk 13.25).

These things go together. They are the two branches of the spiritual life. One is the sacramental life, which is a prerequisite for the mystical life, and what we are considering today is the root, the core, the central point of the mystical life, which springs from the sacramental life. And within worship, Holy Communion is the primary element. Why is Holy Communion a necessary prerequisite? Because when we say "I pray" (*proseuchomai*), we mean "I address a petition (*euche*) to (*pros*) someone", which is what the word *proseuche* (prayer) means. But when we speak of the inner prayer of the heart, we don't call it *proseuche*, but rather *euche*, indicating (by the absence of the prefix *pros*) that the progression of prayer "to" or "towards" a specific person, with a view toward union with that person, has in a sense been achieved. Thus prayer (*euche*) is a kind of stasis, so to speak, a resting in and enjoyment of the place where God is. There is a distinction here, you see.

Prayer, then—*proseuche*—is a turning towards a person. And thus for prayer to exist, this person must also exist. And for me to say "I pray" means that the active presence of that person is a reality for me. I must be able to realize a certain degree of intimacy with that person's presence and his existence. Christ, who is the presence within all things, and present everywhere, becomes present within my life through my participation in worship, and especially through my participation in Holy Communion.

Through my participation in our Church's life of worship, I am joined to Christ and become a member of his body. And to be a living member of the body of Christ means that I must partake of the qualities of Christ, so that there might take place an "interpenetration" and "exchange of attributes", as happened with the two natures of Christ. This is achieved through Holy Communion, which makes me, as a member of the body, share in the properties of my Head, with whom I have been united.

Thus worship and Holy Communion are inseparably united. And what is it that they do? They make God present and alive for me. After that, what then remains to be done? For me to talk to him, to address myself to him who comes to me. And so God, through worship, stretches out towards me, and I, through prayer, stretch out toward him, until our total union comes about. This turning of mine unfolds along the

mystical path; it is an unceasing movement, and comes about, as I have said, initially and essentially through prayer. What happens in church at certain moments, during Vespers, or during the Liturgy at Holy Communion, is continued by means of prayer. And I cannot say that "I will go to church" if I haven't been praying. It is pointless to go to church, unnecessary for me to attend Liturgy, and useless for me to commune, when I am not constantly praying. And it is superfluous for me to pray if I have no part in the Divine Liturgy and the prayer of the Church.

At the same time, however, prayer is supposed to have its own proper place, strictly set apart; a mystical place where it can be cultivated. It is like planting a flower: you dig the earth here, you put manure there; you add whatever else is needed so that it will take root and bloom. If you don't add fertilizer, or if the soil isn't suitable—if it's too sandy, for example—you are wasting your time planting the root. Prayer is fruitless and ascends no higher than our heads (how much less does it reach beyond the clouds and up into the heavens!) if it does not have its mystical place, its mystical fertilizer, which, as we have said, consists especially of vigil, spiritual study, and fasting.

It follows that it is a waste of time to pray if I do not keep vigil—not when our monastery has a vigil, for that is something different, having its own rationale, which is not what we are talking about now. That kind of vigil has to do with worship rather than prayer. If, on the other hand, I don't keep vigil in my cell, if I don't fast constantly, and if I don't study—for it is these which constitute the proper place of prayer—then it is a waste of time for me to pray. Having cleared this up, we can now shine our light on the subject of prayer, on that which concerns us, and having cast our light in that direction, continue to move forward.

What is prayer? Having asked such a question, however, I will not provide you with a definition of prayer. If we turn to St. John Climacus, if we turn to St. John of Damascus, if we turn to any of the saints, we shall see that each one of them provides us with superb definitions which will be useful to us. But what I will tell you now is what prayer is as we experience it in the struggle within our souls, that is, not what prayer is objectively, but how we live prayer subjectively; how one feels at prayer and what he feels prayer to be.

In the first place we said that prayer is a journey toward God. But God is invisible. God is in heaven and I am down here on earth. God is

light and I am darkness. Do you know what a terrible thing it would be for darkness to be able to dispel light? If, of course, it were possible for darkness to dispel light, since light dispels darkness (cf. Jn 1.5). And yet we set about doing something like that through prayer. We should dispel our darkness through the entry of God so that we can enter the realm of light and become radiant. Do you know what it means for flesh to enter the realm of the spirit? Do you know what it means for flesh, which does not inherit the kingdom of heaven (cf. 1 Cor 15.50), to enter into God? Do you know what it means for God, "who cannot be contained anywhere"<sup>2</sup>, to be contained within my own soul? Within something, that is, which is not simply small, but deluged and brimming with passions, inclinations, and desires?

And so it is that, when I pray, I feel at once an insurmountable obstacle which separates me from God: the fact that I am flesh, that I am, in other words, a carnal man; that I am flesh and he is Spirit (I take the word "flesh" in the sense of the Gospels, and not to mean that we do not have souls). Confronted with the transcendence of God, and with his holiness and brightness, I immediately feel my own weakness. I feel that I can do nothing, and that I am beginning a dreadful struggle, a battle, which the Old Testament so splendidly portrays for us in that battle, that struggle, that wrestling of Jacob's at the foot of his famous ladder (Gen 32.24-30). And thus I, a puny human being, must storm the gates of heaven, lay siege to God, conquer God, and make him subject to the desires and intentions concealed within my soul.

It follows that we initially experience prayer, when we begin to pray, as a wrestling-match, a struggle. But note that this is not a struggle in the sense that it is difficult to pray, or that I struggle to collect my thoughts, or overcome my sleepiness, or the weariness in my knees; or that I want to scratch myself and I fight against the urge to scratch. Neither is this a struggle in the sense that I am hungry, and want to go and eat, and say, "No, I shall continue to pray". I do not mean that struggle. That is the ascetic struggle which is something different, another thing altogether. I am speaking instead of the struggle we engage in, not with ourselves—what we said just now was with ourselves—but the struggle we engage in with God. That's quite clear.

<sup>2</sup> 1. Cf. Matins of Christmas (third kathisma); and St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 38.13 (PG 36.325C).

I begin a battle which will be painful, which will be endless—I don't know whether it will end in the next life—a battle with God Himself. When Paul said, "struggle together with me in your prayers" (Rom 15.30), he meant something like this. He felt that he was struggling with God, either for his own sake, or for the churches in his care, and thus he said: "You struggle with God, too, with your prayers, so that our struggles may be united, and in this way, all together, we can wrestle with God and defeat him". Because when I can't beat you by myself, I call upon others, and ask for their help so that I can accomplish my aim.

So the first experience I have, then, is the feeling of an insurmountable obstacle in front of me, of my own smallness, and thus at the same time the feeling of the transcendence of God, along with the experience of a dramatic struggle with God. Think, for a moment, about a man who throws punches at the air. He meets with no resistance, and can easily move his fists in any direction he wants. He spars with the air. Nothing happens to him. He feels nothing resisting the force of his hands. But when you have an opponent, you tense up immediately. Your punch gets stronger at once. You see your muscles and they too are tensed. You've met with resistance. You realize you're hitting and being hit; you feel you're hitting and being hit. When I have no such feeling of a struggle with God, you must understand that I have not even begun to pray.

Let us suppose, though, that we have begun to pray, and I feel that I'm engaged in this fearful wrestling-match with God, that I have entered the fray, and that I have gloved up and begun to strike God. He defends himself, dodges, and resists. I do too, and the question now is whether I'll be the winner or him. The only options are for me to be knocked down, covered in blood, or to beat him, and hear him say to me: "Now you've won". In other words, that he'll surrender himself to me, as he did to all the saints, who did whatever they wanted with God.

If I stop, I'll be a broken man, forever a failure. I can't say that I'm working, living, or praying, unless I win this fight. How much more so if I haven't even begun the fight? Let us suppose, though, that I have this feeling and this experience in all its fullness. I have entered the contest. I begin to wrestle with God. And as I wrestle with God, I feel that this fight is not with my fists, not with my hands, or my feet, or with anything else, but with my intellect (*nous*). It takes place with my spirit, with my contemplative faculty.

That which can be united with God is my spirit. But in the course of our everyday life, my spirit is reduced to flesh, "for", it says, "their being is flesh" (Gen 6.4). Our spirit, which has the innate potential to ascend, to extend upward, to rise and unite with the Holy Spirit—which is the natural fulfillment of its being—nevertheless becomes accustomed to living in poverty, in baseness, in earthliness. And what is it concerned with? It is concerned with my own will, and is shaped and molded together with it: it is concerned with what I will eat, what I will write in a letter, how I'll deal with the problem of new roads on the Holy Mountain, and so on and so forth. And in the process, my spirit becomes a letter, or a road; it becomes the will to do this or that, or anything else you like. My spirit becomes flesh! It becomes swallowed up by my psychological preoccupations after which I can no longer do anything with God! For me, God becomes untouchable and intangible.

And so the spiritual potential within us, the spiritual nature of my being, given to me by God, has to be cultivated. It is the spirit which must speak, and the spiritual senses which must be cultivated—our "faculties of noetic perception"<sup>3</sup>, as they are called, because it is these which can palpably lay hold of God, especially what we call the "contemplative faculty" (*to noeron*). This latter has the ability to be drawn toward God, and, in a certain manner, speak to God, as we would say. For this to take place, the contemplative faculty must be completely united with our reasoning faculty (*to logistikon*), that is, with our mind (*logos*), so that the entire content of my spiritual being can be turned toward God, addressed to God, directed to God.

Now I have the immediate feeling of a dialogue, although not yet a dialogue as such, but rather a cry, for to the extent that I am still wrestling and have not won, God is far away. I'm down here and God is up in the heavens. I am corruptible and he is incorruptible. I am earth and he's the purest air. He is something heavenly. He is something different. How then can I be united to him and speak to him? And that's why I cry out. For example, when I'm trying to find someone, and I can't see where he

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 26: "The intellect is clothed in the faculty of noetic perception ... and we should not cease to seek for it within ourselves" (PG 88.1020AB); and Diadochos of Photike, *On Spiritual Knowledge* 1: "By means of love the soul is joined to the virtues of God, searching out God by means of noetic perception" (cf. *Philokalia*, vol. 1 [London: Faber & Faber, 1979], p. 253).

is, I go out onto the balcony and shout: "Father Theoktist-o-o-os!" And if he's around, he'll answer; and if I hear him, then I'll start talking to him.

We're still in the place where we don't see God. We don't hear God. We don't understand God. We don't know God. We live in total ignorance, in what is essentially complete oblivion. I neither remember God nor know him. This is why I cry to him all the time, so that he will take pity on me and answer me. And when God answers me, then I can strike up a conversation. This is how prayer begins! At this stage we are undergoing experiences, which, as we said, are a prelude to prayer.

But even now, as you realize, we haven't started to pray. Which is why, you see, we experience prayer as a journey, as the first steps of a journey, as a cry from the depths of the soul. Prayer can be said with the lips. It can be said aloud. It can be uttered within the mouth, or in the throat. It can also be said from the heart. Instead of the vocal chords, the strings of the heart can be sounded, sending forth the cry of the spirit. It doesn't matter. What's important is that we bring forth prayer from out of the depths. The one who strives to pray will understand these things and distinguish between them: he will know when he speaks with his mouth, when with the heart—or with the spirit, because, in the end, it's not the heart which should speak, but the spirit in the heart. Little by little he becomes aware of these things, he distinguishes between them, he learns them. Just as I'm able to recognize you because I've seen you so often, the same thing happens here. The lips might move, or they may not move at all. What matters is that a cry should come forth from the depths which, like a loud roar, like an earthquake, will shake the heavens and finally force God to answer, and say to us, "Why do you cry to me?" (Ex 14.15).

I may be standing, in order to show my intent, my ardor, my sense of urgency, my readiness. I may be kneeling, in order to express my humility and unworthiness. I may be prone, face down, to show the futility and the failure of all that I have done until now, so that God will take pity on me much more, and much more quickly. I may go for walks with my prayer-rope in hand, crying out or not crying out, in order to overcome my weakness, or my sleepiness. I may work in order to dispel my torpor (*acedia*). I may climb up and down the mountain, or carry stones about in order to vanquish the weakness of my flesh, because the spirit may be willing, but the flesh continues to be weak (cf. Mt 26.41). I can assume any posture and use any means, but what I must feel is that the cry of



prayer comes forth from my inner depths, so that one day God will hear it. I call out many times: "Father Theoktisto-o-os! ... Father Theoktisto-o-os!", but it still may be five, ten, or twenty times before he can hear my voice, either because he's behind some rock, or at that moment he may be praying, or singing or chanting.

I have to wake him up, as the Apostle did when he went to the Lord, and said: "Lord, are you sleeping? (Mt 8.24-25) Don't you see how great the storm is?" (Mk 4.38-39). And Christ got up, for he was not sleeping, and said to him, "calm down", and as soon as he turned to the sea and said "peace, be still", immediately the tempest ceased. Do you know how the roof seems to be raised by the shouting of many voices; or how it feels as if your chest is going to burst open when an anguished cry comes out of you? Something like that has to happen with our prayer, if God is to hear us. He wants this.

But won't God hear us otherwise, and doesn't he know what we need? Of course he does. But God does this, first so that we will express our longing for him, and for that longing to be uniquely ours. Second so that we can become aware of our need and nakedness, and third so that we can learn to seek him. Because if God were to surrender to us immediately, before we've done any of the things that we've been talking about, and before we've had any of these experiences, we'd cast him aside as easily as we'd won him, because we would not have understood his true value. If your father freely gives you millions, you'll throw it away in the streets. But if you work hard and sweat to earn a mere fifty drachmas a day, you'll begin to know the value of money and start to save it. You won't scatter it around easily. In exactly the same way, so that you won't scatter God to the winds, God wants us to feel him first, by means of the severe anguish of the cry from the depths which we send forth to him.

The first thing, then, is to experience prayer as a struggle. Second, as a cry from the depths, which comes forth in a variety of ways, as we said before. But when we progress, and actually live through this change of direction toward God, expressed as a cry from the depths, we'll see that, in the end, our cry is not heard by God. It has to be changed, transformed into silence within an atmosphere of silence.

God is the God of those who are at rest and maintain silence, and we shall feel this when we have cried out to him. However much we may talk about silence, we shall not understand its significance and

meaning unless we follow this succession of steps. Why? What is that which we now call "silence"? What is it? When you shout, you can't hear the other person. You have to stop in order to hear him. When there's a lot of noise and talking going on around you, your own voice gets mixed up with it, and can't be heard or distinguished. Everybody's got to stop, including you, if you want to hear the other person. And if they happen to be engaged in some conversation, the first thing you'll say to them is "Shhh! Shhh!" and then you'll speak, and then your voice will be clearly distinguished. This is the experience and this is the reality that we shall live when our soul turns toward God.

In the progress of our prayer—and what does "progress" mean in this context? It means the "egress" of prayer, the "going forth" of prayer, when prayer is going to emerge from within us, to become a true movement toward God—we shall see in our silence that prayer is a "silence within silence", which means absolute silence. It follows, then, that either I have to learn and know—and I must know and learn—how to pray amidst noise, because it is impossible to achieve absolute quiet; or I must seek—as certainly I must—absolute silence for prayer, as far as this is possible. For even the singing of a bird, or the murmuring of a nearby brook, or the whispering of the wind, can interrupt your prayer and drown out the word emerging from within you. If you don't know this, you're not doing anything. We have to learn to pray in absolute silence, and this is why the night is so important. I will pray amidst the noise, but above all I will seek absolute silence, so that I can speak to God. God responds especially to those who keep silent in a silent place. Silence, then, in quiet.

When I cry out to God, I should come to a stop. Through breathing, I inhale and exhale. But I am most attentive, and can concentrate most intensely on what's happening, precisely when my breathing is suspended. Attention is most acute during this intermediary moment, during this momentary cessation of breath, this interval between inhalation and exhalation. Unless I learn to breathe properly, my life and my breathing, my prayer, and everything will be confused. I must learn how to take hold of that interval, of that listening, of that inclination of the ear, and then I'll see that this attentiveness is the most basic thing in prayer, and not my own cries. If I don't cry out, I will not learn this, which is such a simple and easy thing. But if I do cry out, then I shall discover that my soul comes to listen as God comes to speak.

I'll come to see that this is the most important thing: the inclination of the ear in absolute quiet. So I must learn to be silent, which means I must learn how to listen, to wait, to expect the voice of God. In this silence I will be able to hear my own heartbeat—not the beating of my heart of flesh, but I'll feel my life-giving spirit, the foundation of my very being, which is none other than the Holy Spirit, for all things are given by the Holy Spirit.

If I attain such silence, then I'll be able to understand the meaning of this breathing, and I'll hear the rustling of the wings of the Holy Spirit. I'll be acutely aware of how close the Holy Spirit is to me, and I will long to receive the Spirit, and I will understand what is meant by: "We didn't even know there was a Holy Spirit" (Acts 19.2). I'll realize that for all the years I was in the world, and for all the time I've been in the monastery, I never learned what is meant by the Holy Spirit. "We have not so much as heard that there is a Holy Spirit", and have not known him (Acts 19.2).

We may perhaps say something like this out of humility, by which I mean all our talking about humility, and yet, my beloved ones, we don't understand it. One must enter deeply into Holy Scripture, and dwell within it. But we don't dwell within it, and we don't experience it, for we live purely exteriorized lives. Let's say, for example, that I'm speaking of the Holy Trinity, and I say: "The Holy Trinity is three persons, it is one nature, it is this, it is that...", or that "Christ has two natures, but is one hypostasis, one person, and so on". What does that mean? We understand no more about all of that than people living in the world. Why? Because whereas it is possible for us to think about these things rationally, we can understand them only in our spirit, only through the Spirit.

We need a revelation, such as that which was given to St. John the Theologian. And how wonderfully tradition tells us that the rocks of his cave were broken open, and formed three knots which invigorated him and made him understand the mystery of the Holy Trinity. He immediately attained certainty and wrote about the Holy Trinity. A most wonderful tradition! The roof has to be torn wide open, my beloved, by the breath of the Spirit, so that I may see him, and understand him. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1.1). Now just try understanding that, let alone living it, and writing about it! God has to breathe it into you. That's what divine inspiration means.

Little by little the living experience comes, it progresses within our souls, and God establishes a place for himself within our existence. And his footsteps and his voice merge with our footsteps and our voice and we become one with God. Then we acquire the experience of true existence, and we feel the meaning and presence of the Holy Spirit. We begin to desire to acquire the Holy Spirit, so that one day we can say: "Come and dwell within us, O Holy Spirit, and cleanse us from every stain"—because our soul is full of stains, they fill our soul, and there's nothing we ourselves can do about it.

When this occurs, my beloved fathers and brothers, when we understand the nearness of the Spirit and the necessity of his presence—for at this stage we have not yet acquired the Holy Spirit—then we shall find that our hearts beat more intensely. Have you ever noticed that our hearts beat faster when we're told that "so-and-so is coming", someone we've been awaiting; or "so-and-so is coming", someone whom we fear? We have an analogous, inner spiritual experience. We feel within ourselves that secret, anxious expectation, which is expressed outwardly, so that we can be aware of it, and we call it the beating of our heart. These are spiritual experiences and can only be expressed through shadows of bodily parallels and parables.

We have, then, this anxious waiting and earnest expectation. When we receive this mystical experience, then we'll progress and have that silent delight, which we call a foretaste of the coming of the Spirit and deep knowledge of the presence of God.

Try to understand this. It's not always easy, fathers, to explain these things in a way that can be easily grasped. Our souls must ask for it, and then what the Lord says will come to pass: "Ask, and it will be given to you; knock and it will be opened to you" (Mt 7.7; Lk 11.9). If you call upon him, he will appear. And we will understand then what we do not understand now. The Holy Spirit himself will tell us. No one can be our teacher except Christ, to whom his disciples say: "Teach us how to pray" (Lk 11.1). Every other teacher is nothing but an impoverished voice, which can only make us say, "Ah! He doesn't understand anything, he doesn't know anything: I'll go directly to Christ!" That's the only meaning that anyone else can have who speaks to us about prayer. Anyone else is a demagogue, a fraud. He can only make us realize that he can't teach us anything, making us say: "Spirit, where on earth are you? You come and teach me!"

So, I repeat. When I realize that the Holy Spirit is breathing near me, and that, instead of having him breathing next to me, I can draw him into myself, and that he will become the renewal of my existence, the reshaping of my life, of my soul, then this mystical, anxious expectation begins. And when it begins, I have a foretaste of the tidings of the Spirit's coming. Because I know that what I seek from him he will give me. And thus I say within myself: "Because he will give it to me, I already have it". Something assures me of this. "You already have what you are seeking; before taking it, you have already received it" (cf. Mk 11.24).

This is why I have this silent delight, this silent foretaste of the gifts which I will be receiving, even the silent foretaste of the kingdom of heaven. Why? How are these two things connected? Because God is in the heavens, and I am here, and so the delight which I will have, this preliminary delight, must be for me a kind of "pre-introduction", so to speak, into the bosom of the kingdom of heaven. It must be a prelude to the sounds and angelic voices which are heard up there. And thus I begin to become aware, roughly, of what paradise is, what the kingdom of heaven is. How can I pray to God, when God is there, and I neither see him nor hear him? I have to learn where he is, and discover what such a "where" might be.

And so I begin to have some sort of preliminary comprehension of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. What is heaven? What are the "mansions" which are there? What is the "Sun of Righteousness"? Who are the saints? What are saints like? How is Christ in the saints? What, roughly speaking, is the Holy Trinity? But note, only "roughly speaking", for I am still here. And yet, from afar the clouds begin to disperse a little, and I begin to see! Look: there's the moon! Those must be the Pleiades—and that must be this or that star!

Now I begin to understand, and my soul is warmed by these mysteries which, to some extent, begin to be revealed to me. And then, my beloved ones, there begins a new period—let's put it like that—in my spiritual life: delight in silence or silence in delight. This is now something different. Not the silence we were talking about before. This is now a spiritual silence. It is the silence of my spirit. Previously it was the silence of my psychological faculties, the silence of my soul. But now it is the silence of my spiritual world, of the eyes of my soul. It is the closing up of myself, sitting here with my head bowed, so that I can see him.

Since I now find myself before the gates of heaven, I experience delight, an enjoyment, a warmth, a glow, and I remain silent in order to hear his voice. Now, as we have said, my spirit is silent, the spirit which will cry: "Abba, Father!" (Gal 4.6). Now I am silent, and henceforth I rejoice. I have a warmth inside me, even a bodily warmth. I am at rest. I'm relaxed. I have the disposition to pray, but I don't want to pray. I want to wait for God.

When this happens, then, in the midst of this spiritual silence, the Holy Spirit begins to breathe within me. It is the Holy Spirit who unites me to God, who brings me into a conjunction of energies, and I begin to have an inkling of what's happening. Then, the Holy Spirit, who is light, when he enters into me, reveals to me the depths of my heart.

Before I could realize what I am, I first had to understand somehow what heaven is. I first had to draw near somehow to the mystery of the Holy Trinity, and especially to the presence of the Spirit, before I could understand that which is so much my own. Look how far away from us our hearts are! What an inaccessible place it is! We know everything. But we have no idea what's contained within our own heart—what a morass, what passions, what rottenness, what darkness—that we do not know. Each of us thinks that he's a personality, that he's a saint! That he's a "somebody" who can stand before God and say to him: "My God, my God, I've given you this, I've devoted myself to you, I've done this, that, and the other thing for you ..."

And what have I done? We've understood nothing. But when the Spirit draws near, he reveals to me, my friends, the darkness inside me, my sins, and I begin to acquire a degree of self-knowledge. For self-examination, you see, and self-criticism is an activity of silence. In such silence let us await the Spirit of God. And, like a beam of light, the Spirit comes to illuminate my heart, at the very moment when I am waiting for him, he illumines my heart. This is where the obstacle is, and thus it is also the place of struggle. Here the spirit will wrestle with the flesh, so that the spirit may prevail and the flesh be vanquished. He grants me a revelation, in other words, and I come to understand two things.

The first is that the arena is here, within the heart. It is here that God must come, so that he and I can draw closer to each other, become acquainted, love each other, talk about things, and finally be united.

Secondly, that the arena is here, precisely because this is where the obstacles are: my ignorance and my heedlessness—the fact that I don't



even remember God in my life. And even when I cried out and said, "My God, my God", I really wasn't calling upon God, but was interested only in myself. Interested in wanting to pray, because that's what the Gospel says, or because that's what my Elder told me, or because it's something I'm supposed to do, or because I had this need, or that desire. That was ignorance and heedlessness, and we still don't know what those two things mean. My ignorance and heedlessness cast a shadow over God. I don't remember him, and I don't know him. Why? Because he is hidden behind my passions. We've been separated! I've been locked out of paradise, and can no longer eat from the tree of life, and unite myself with it, in order to regain life. "In the day that you eat of that fruit", he says, "you will die" (Gen 2.17). And he shuts mankind out of paradise. Why? For on the day we eat again of the tree of life, we shall be restored to life. Paradise is still closed, because the "kingdom of heaven is within us" (Lk 17.21). That which is closed off is inside of us. It's closed off by the cherubim. What cherubim? The passions which keep my heart closed off from God. That's what it means.

So now I begin to understand what passion is, and that I am under its sway. I begin to realize that I don't know God. I begin to understand that God ... well! What is this God? The one whom I have preached from pulpits for nearly twenty years; to whom I may have called out "God, be merciful to me" (Lk 18.13) in church? I may have been saying, with my prayer-rope, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner", and not have even known who the "Lord Jesus Christ is", or what "have mercy on me" means, or what "sinner" means. Because if I don't understand these things, how can I say: "Have mercy on me"? I don't even know what "have mercy on me" means. But once I do, then I'll know what the kingdom of heaven means, and what the heart means, and what passion is, and what it means for God to enter into us, and that it is here, here where the arena is.

Well, things are now falling into place. From the place where I was calling "Father Theoktisto-o-os!", I've now come closer to you. "Come here, over here", I say to you. I can't shout, with you down there and me up here. I'll get tired of shouting, and everyone will hear us. When I love someone, I want there to be just the two of us, so that we can talk about things very simply, side by side. I want him to come here into the arena of my striving. And this, my beloved, is one of the most crucial

and awesome marks of our spiritual life. Let's see if we'll ever begin to address our petitions to the Lord, to pray to God. It will be a moment when we live the drama of the poet who said, "Go away, God", and then, "My God, come back!" When God approached him, he felt he was his executioner, and said, "Go away, you are my executioner". And when God made as if to go, he said, "Come back, you are my friend". What is at stake here is whether we'll accept God or reject him. Up to that point, we'll have been splashing about in a dish of water imagining that we were swimming. Till that time, we will have been playing a game with God, who cannot be toyed with. But the time has come for us to see if we'll accept or reject him.

Previously we had the experience of a wrestling-match. Now we're at the point where we are taken hold of by God. It's likely that, in the end, we too will say: "Go away". And then afterwards, when it's too late, we'll say, with finality: "My last friend has left me". There is no other friend for our life, no other hope.

This is a crucial moment. Why? Because it is precisely the moment when we accept or refuse to accept our selves, because we discover a self so dirty, so dark, so devious, so calculating, and costing us so dearly, that it is not in our interest to acknowledge it, and thus we hide behind our self-centeredness, behind the knowledge of self, behind the love of self, which exists in every soul. It's also the moment when my Ego is awakened, and I don't want to accept that this is what I am—sin!

It's a fine thing to stand before God and say: "Lord Jesus Christ, you who have granted me knowledge of you, who have deemed me worthy to be a worker for you, and have made me a monk! Lord Jesus Christ..." This is easy stuff. But to sit down in full knowledge and to say: "God, have mercy on me the sinner"—how many times can I do that? If I do it at all! Because for that to happen I must crush my being. Just as I might use a nut-cracker to break a walnut, so that it goes "crack" and smashes into pieces, this I must also do with my heart, so that I can collect and throw out all its garbage. So that I can discover that what I have, what I am, what I have loved, what I have desired, what I have been seeking in my prayer up to now, are all what Paul calls "dung" (Phil 3.8), and which I am called on to deny. I have to understand that all these things are the lowest forms of waste, so that I can be filled with God.

We find ourselves, from this point forward, face to face. God is still there, but I've begun to realize how far away from me he is, and thus I

consider the terms, I weigh the cost, whether or not I should agree to contend with him. What a dilemma! In the beginning, when I was confronted with the revelation of his kingdom, and the reflection of his light, I could only wonder at what this God might be! And now I have my own darkness to consider as well. Perhaps I'll stay where I am. This is all costing me far too much.

When I consent to go forward, then the silent gazing of my heart through the Spirit will begin, and I'll gradually begin to feel that I need to remember God, that I need to get to know him. I move forward into this dimension by overcoming my difficulties, and by not denying God for the sake of myself, but rather realizing through toil and sweat what it means to "deny yourself" (Mt 16.24; Mk 8.34)—we say it every day, but we need to feel this "deny yourself". When we have done all of this, then the first tears will begin to fall from our eyes. Not the tears of which the Fathers speak. Not those, for those are the tears of the Spirit. But rather the first tears of our self-centeredness, which is beginning to break down; the first tears which reveal how impoverished I am, that I have nothing, because those which drop from my eyes are very, very human.

Something inside me starts to hurt, to kick, and in my pain I begin to weep. In my pain I begin to cry out again: "My God, my God". It is now that I say: "Come, Holy Spirit, and cleanse me from my sin. Heavenly Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, come and teach me in my ignorance, come and abide in me, though I am filled with evil, and cleanse me of every stain. Remove all that is inside of me, so that you can come and dwell there". Now I can say the prayer of the Spirit!

When I get to this point, God, who is always ready to respond to our prayer and never loses a single moment, rushes into my heart. But, you will say to me, only after so much torment? It's what we've been saying all along: the experience of God's delay is something subjective. It always seems to us that, when we pray, God is slow to arrive. But in fact, God does not delay, no, not for a minute, not even for an instant.

Now I begin to seek the Spirit of God. And now the Spirit immediately invades my heart. The Spirit comes. The Spirit. What does "the Spirit" mean? The Spirit is everywhere present. Wasn't the Spirit there before? "You send forth your Spirit and they are created" (Ps 103.30), but when "you turn your face away", that is, your Spirit, your presence, "all things are immediately darkened, everything is cast down, is lost, dissolved into dust". Everything falls into the abyss of non-existence.

Now the Spirit begins to reveal himself, to cry "Abba, Father" (Gal 4.6), that is, he reveals to us his identity with the Father. Moreover, the Son is also acting in the Holy Spirit, who moves within the church, bearing witness to the Father. Now you can interpret all the passages of Scripture which describe these movements of the Holy Trinity, the economical movements of the Trinity in our lives.

So the Holy Spirit begins mystically to reveal to us the Father, his identity with the Father, and now we have a feeling for the Son, who is joined to us and who comes to us, the Coming Christ. And at once we undergo another, new kind of experience, of which until now we were ignorant. What experience is this? The experience of a new, spiritual anguish.

When you're in the dark, and it feels as if some shadow falls across you, you shrink back, don't you? And you wonder what it is. When you hear a sudden noise, you want to know what it is, because you are bewildered. It's like that. You hear the voice of God, you feel his presence, you are taken by surprise, you're startled by it, and you worry. What on earth is this? God? Satan? A passion, a projection of my ego? What on earth is it?

Because we're now on spiritual paths, I'll say what I have to say very briefly, very roughly, in a very broad outline—let's put it like that—without getting into the details of any particular experience. So far, we've considered the experiences which our soul undergoes in order to get to the point of being able to pray. From that point forward, we enter into that stage of prayer which is the quest for God. The dialogue hasn't yet begun, nor has prayer (*euche*), and so neither has communion with God really begun. That will happen after what we say now.

So now the anguish of our soul begins! It's as if my soul says, "Who are you? What are you that you make me afraid?" I'm describing things, of course, in very rough terms. In the beginning, God hides from us, as if it were a game of hide-and-seek, or when you approach someone from behind, and place your hands over his eyes, and say:

"Guess who I am!"

"You're so-and-so".

"No!" I say.

"Then you must be what's-his-name".

"Wrong again!"

"Then you're such-and-such".

"Yes!" And I uncover his eyes and give him a hug.

We experience something exactly like this in our soul, and in the course of our prayer. We are in anguish, and God hides from us, as if he were playing with us. And thus I shout to him again more loudly:

"Why are you toying with me? Who are you? Tell me what you want!"

And in response, the Spirit will say to us:

"You have been calling for me all these many years, and now you ask me what I want?"

I begin to understand more fully what I was seeking, what I was after, why I'm alive. Sometimes we say, "We don't even know why we're alive". And unless God teaches us, we really don't know, and can't understand, why we're alive.

"So who are you?" we say to him later.

"It's me, God!"

But inasmuch as we are still in the grip of our passions, we bow our heads, look down, and rub the sleep from our eyes. Then we open them and take a good look at him, a sustained, focused look. He draws closer to us little by little. We are cleansed, and he strips away from himself the clouds and the darkness. He also clears away the dark cloud which surrounds me, he opens it just enough so that he can somehow become visible to us.

Our anguish now becomes spiritual delight, not merely a foretaste of his coming, but the enjoyment of his presence here and now, of his proximity. I begin to feel that it's him. My heart begins to beat as if I know him.

"So you are my God?"

"I am. Don't you recognize me? It is I, who brought you into the world, who baptized you, who tonsured you a monk, who answered you when you prayed. And when you were saying 'My God, my God,' it was I who helped you, but you didn't recognize me, because you really weren't seeking me at all. It was I who was hiding behind your hunger, behind your thirst, behind your sleep, behind your kneeling, behind all your successes and all your sins: it was I who was behind everything!"

My heart warms even more and I want to embrace him. But I can't. He has to embrace me. Who am I? I am the absence of God. I cry out!

Now I begin to see him more clearly. He must be my God. We've never seen God before, but surely this has to be him. When compared to all that exists, he is something beyond all existence, and yet he is the "One Who Exists"! (cf. Ex 3.14). He alone exists beyond all existing things, he is exclusively the "One Who Exists". Now I feel within myself the meaning of the "One Who Is", of the "One Who Exists". Now I understand that nothing else exists of all the things that have existed, except for him, who does not exist as other things exist. He alone is the One who exists essentially. He is eternal, without end, and, from now on, I have a place in his life, in his existence, in the history of God.

From this moment, when finally I will or will not be united with God—because that danger is still there—I have passed the dreadful, critical stage of my egotistical self-centeredness, and can proceed toward the spiritual arena. I can, however, still refuse God, because even though my ego has been struck a deadly blow, it continues to exist within me.

Gradually I discover God. I get to know him. This is God. I like him. Now God enters into me. How does he do this? Now I understand what it means that God "is light", that Christ is "light from light", and that the Holy Spirit is "in light". "In your light we shall see light" (Ps 35.10). In light, in the Spirit, we shall see light, we shall see God: the Father is light, the Son is light, the Holy Spirit is light<sup>4</sup>. And at once, all those things which were but the shadow of the light, essentially lacking in existence, are illuminated and fade from our view. They do not disappear, but simply cease to be active, they are deactivated. They are flooded with light. Every facet is illuminated.

Now we arrive at the second critical stage where we are in danger. For now we see ourselves, in all our manifold diversity, filled with light, and, at the same time, we see the non-existence of the self. But to be able to live, we must immerse ourselves in the divinity. We must, in other words, become conscious of the saying: "Whoever loses his life will find it" (Mt 16.25). Whoever dies, will live. But whoever finds his soul, will lose it. And that's when I feel my non-existence, the death of my self.

And if I love God—for love is what's needed here, my fathers and brothers—I'll feel within me a pang of love and joy, proclaiming: "Yes, God!" This is my soul's acceptance of God. It is the "Yes" which I say to

<sup>4</sup> Exapostelation of Epiphany.



God; a "Yes" that I say with heightened awareness. Before it was just childish shouts. Now I realize that my self has been lost. Completely gone. The whole of it is God. If I say "Yes" to him, all is well. But if I wish to drag my self up from the innermost chambers, from the lower strata of the subconscious—there is always the fear that my self will wish to resurface—then, immediately, what St. Symeon the New Theologian says will happen at once: God is lost!<sup>5</sup> And it will take years for us to cry out again, to find him again, if we ever do! And this time, his absence is conscious. Our earlier refusal of God, which we spoke about, when we became conscious of our inner darkness, was a hardening which distanced us from God, threatening to cast us down into an earthly way of life.

Now, however, we're faced with something deeper, more spiritual, and therefore more terrible. This is, as it were, the final temptation. There came a time when even the Lord said, "Let this cup pass from me" (Mt 26.39), and this is the time, when we, in turn, shall say the same. This is the time when we realize that we are lost, and what it means to die, for "all those who were baptized into Christ, were baptized into his death" (Rom 6.3). We are buried together, so that we might rise together. We are "buried together" in spirit, by the grace of the Spirit (Rom 6.4). If we are conscious of our death—and here the point is whether or not we can accept such a death and make it our own—if it costs us too much, we will stop short at "if it is possible, let this cup pass from me". We don't refuse God, but we refuse death. We can't live with God, and our God will go away. And we'll simply remain here, enclosed within our own thoughts, believing that we're standing firm, that we're upright, thinking that we're pillars, thinking that we're spiritual people, while in reality we're utterly broken and spent, being nothing at all. But if our heart, our will, our being says "Yes", then God will continue to reveal himself to us, and begins—no longer to play with us—but to open himself up to us. Not our heart, but himself!

Now the experience of his presence is so strong that it removes all forgetfulness from us. And God begins to turn, to revolve, so that we can know him better, so that we can see him, learn more about him. We begin to know him and the knowledge of God is born. The knowledge

of God! We begin to learn about God not from without, but from within, in our heart, because God has entered our heart. Then our desire burns more strongly, and we want God to open up to us more. Then our soul cries of its own accord: "Lighten my darkness, lighten my darkness"<sup>6</sup>. Reveal yourself to me, reveal yourself to me. But at that moment, God leaves us. Not in anger, for we have not driven him away. He leaves of his own accord.

Now we know the journey. We learned how to seek God and how God can enter into us. But we have not yet been united with God. We learned who God is, and now we're in the position that I'm in, when I know you, and say to you: "Father Theoktistos, pass me that thing there, won't you please". I know you now. I've spoken to you. I've seen who you are, and I can ask for you at any moment. You'll come and serve as my parhegoumenarios (i.e., personal assistant to the abbot), and I'll have you with me always; or I'll make you my "Lord and my God" (Jn 20.29), and I will become, not God's assistant, but his slave. I'll fall at his feet, as all the saints of the Church have fallen down before him.

Now prayer begins. Prayer can be an internal discourse (ευχη), when I learn to bear Christ within me and speak to him freely. When I learn to call upon the Lord within myself, I am at the stage prior to prayer in the Spirit. But now is not the time to set sail upon those seas. We'll stop here. To finish, though, I'd like to say one last thing. We'll see that in this struggle of ours, in which we are still beginners, we talk to God. Do you remember what we said? At some point we discover that prayer is a cry.

I told you at the beginning: we experience a struggle, then a cry from the depths, then the closeness of the Spirit, silence in tranquility, anguished expectation, then the silent foretaste and delight. After that comes the critical moment of self-knowledge, the revelation and knowledge of my heart, and the point at which I will accept or refuse God, the point of knowledge, in part, of the Spirit.

It follows that all of this is a hunt for God which takes place through the intellect (*nous*). It is also a conversation. In the beginning we speak to God, but because there are so many obstacles between us, especially

<sup>5</sup> St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Discourse 35* (ed. Basil Krivocheine, SC 113 [Paris: Cerf, 1965], p. 320, lines 175-80); id., *Discourse 36* (ibid., pp. 340-46, lines 140-95); id., *Hymn 48* (ed. Johannes Koder, SC 196 [Paris: Cerf, 1973], p. 138, lines 102-112).

<sup>6</sup> Philotheos Kokkinos, *Sermon on St. Gregory Palamas 18* (ed. Demetrios Tsamis, *The Hagiographical Works of Philotheos Kokkinos of Constantinople* [Thessaloniki: Center for Byzantine Studies, 1985], p. 447, lines 16-17).

disruptive thoughts, the intellect tries to expel from the mind (*dianoia*) whatever may be there. It does this in order to be able itself to ascend to God, to shout: "My God, my God; My Lord, my Lord; Eloi, Eloi, my God, lama sabachthani, why have you forsaken me?" (cf. Mk 15.34). The intellect senses that it has become a thing discarded on the earth, while God remains, in spite of this, "Eloi, Eloi, my God, my God". My God, my God. He is my God! And I am discarded, writhing in a thousand darknesses, down on the earth below.

So my intellect struggles to throw off, to expel from itself, whatever is evil, whatever is foreign to it. For these will become disruptive thoughts that will suffocate the rising intellect, the intellect which wishes to rise up to God. It must therefore expel all that is rooted in desire, all that comes from the will, all that stems from earlier experiences of alien things, so that we can attain forgetfulness of the past, but not of God; so that everything becomes foreign to us, and we ourselves attain ignorance of all things, not knowing anything. So that I hear someone say "Father Arsenios", and "Father Arsenios" means nothing to me. Who is this "Father Arsenios"? He's my brother. But if I love Father Arsenios, and my soul turns toward him, how will God be able to enter? I love him, and when I go to pray, I'll be praying for Father Arsenios, and not for myself. The same is true of my health, my occupation, my desires, my joys, my ambitions, and anything else you care to mention. And the intellect, as we've said, strives to drive out all of this.

Then something else happens to me. When these things begin to leave me, I notice that my intellect pays attention to what I say to God, whether within myself or aloud, and I become conscious both of someone speaking and of my intellect listening attentively. This is what the Apostle Paul means when he says that we can "sing and pray in the spirit, but also by means of the intellect" (1 Cor 14.15). We sense, if only vaguely, what he means by "in the spirit", namely: that the spirit within me can seek God, that it's the spirit which seeks God. And I also understand what "intellect" means: it's related to the spirit, but it's something different; it is a property, a faculty. And the intellect, the faculty of intellection, begins to follow attentively, and I observe that it is united, not with that which is presented to me from without, but with what is spoken or thought. It is united to these, you see, for my discourse can be with my lips, or with my reasoning. It may be with my thinking, or even with something even deeper, some-

thing deeply interior, let's say, and then I begin to see the distinctions in all this, and my intellect learns to follow closely, unified with what's being thought or said. My intellect unites with these, and thus speaks to God; it is my faculty of intellection, the "governing part" of my mind, as the Fathers of the Church call it.

As a result, I now begin to pray to God with a sense of purpose. This is why I need all my will power to rid myself of everything foreign, to drive out everything alien, so that what remains is only "My God, my God". So that the intellect can be united with the intellection, or with the invocation of God, and so be united with God himself.

Later on, as I progress, I feel that, during prayer, my intellect is caught up, but that happens when I've already begun to pray. As I've said, we're now going back over things in very broad outline. It's as if we've taken a tour of the monastery, and I've shown you all there is to see, after which I tell you something about all twenty monasteries in summary form. That's what we're doing now.

In the end, the intellect in a state of prayer is caught up. You feel it caught up—"whether in the body or outside the body", we can't tell (cf. 2 Cor 12.2)—and the whole of it rising up toward God. I feel it being caught up, that is, I feel it leaving, exiting. I feel it going out, flowing out, rising, I feel it proceeding. Is this not prayer?

Prayer (*proseuche*) is directed "to" or "towards" (*pros*) someone, which is why it is also described as "being seized"<sup>7</sup>, for it is seized from within and ascends to God. That is, my intellect is caught up and rises to God, until it is united with him who seized it, who becomes God caught up within me. My enraptured intellect must learn to live together with God, although this must not happen externally, as we said before, but rather internally.

Those were sublime moments when, "fourteen years ago" (2 Cor 12.2), Paul saw his intellect caught up. And exceedingly beautiful are those moments when the intellects of the saints are likewise enraptured. But what matters most is not that my mind should be seized by the power of attraction to God, but that God should be seized by my intellect, through divine grace, and caught within my own heart.

<sup>7</sup> John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 28: "The perfection of prayer is being caught up (harpagmos) to the Lord" (PG 88.1132D).

At such times, man appears as a flame, his soul and his ascent blaze forth. And sometimes he himself becomes like a flame, and the very place where he stands becomes illumined by him, and he himself is often seen as light. At the same time, he himself sees and contemplates the light within this divine manifestation. This is precisely the moment of mystical union with God, and, consequently, the realization and perfection of prayer.

Prayer has reached its goal! The little ship set out from our boatyard and has reached the place we wanted it to go. Up to now, we've been on the road. This is now the end of our prayer! It is the seizing of God, through my own will, in the Holy Spirit in my heart. Now my intellect and my spirit are united with God: I become whole. I am absorbed by the flame, by the all-devouring light of God, by the abyss of his mercy, like a drop of water absorbed by the ocean. And I feel my mystical union with God, who was present in the sacramental life, as we said in the beginning, and who has now become personally participable, while I myself participate in his life, and he in my hypostasis, in my nature. God has now become one with me. Now I have this union.

My nature and his active nature are unified in one person. Not in the person of the Word of God, but in the person of man at prayer. And so what took place in Christ, through the virginity of the Most Holy Theotokos, when two natures were united in one person, in the hypostasis of the Divine Word, now takes place in me, through my virginal soul, in travail night and day, and finally giving birth, so that the two shall be "one flesh" (Gen 2.24), "one spirit" (1 Cor 6.17), so that by becoming one spirit, we will become one man. Not the person of the Word of God, but the person of every saint at prayer.

We have before us the hypostasis of the saint, the holy person, who has been united with God and has become a divine human being, God and man. And this is what was foretold by the prophet: "When the Holy Spirit comes, he will dwell in us, and we shall be sons and daughters to him" (Jl 3.1-2). Then he will pour out rivers within us, as the prophet says again: "Rivers will be poured out by him" (Ezek 36.27-28). Then the Holy Spirit will begin to cry out from within us, and pray and act, instead of us, on our behalf; and he will live, and be our life, living instead of ourselves. The time has come. The moment has arrived for us, too, when the prophecy of God has come true: "I said, you are gods" (Ps 81.6). This is why he called us gods. This is why we cry out and pray, so that we can truly become gods such as the Lord wants us to be.

My fathers, we've said only a few things today, by way of an introduction to what prayer is, how it is experienced as a journey, and where it ought to take us. Why has God called us? For this: that we should become gods. Tell me, then, if we achieve anything else whatsoever, but fail in this, will we have actually accomplished anything at all? Our monastery would be a legal entity, but it wouldn't be a monastery, it wouldn't be one of God's mansions, it wouldn't be a school for souls, or a house of God, or a womb receiving the Holy Trinity. And we, for our part, will be those poor beings who row the boat but achieve nothing and make no progress. Indeed, we will remain moored to the shore by the rope of the flesh which ties us to the earth. But, in truth, we are called to become such as he said.

This is why I'm asking you to tell me what we achieve if we fail in this. Nothing, it seems to me. Let us struggle with ourselves, with our passions, with our asceticism, in our vigils, in our fasting, and for whatever else. Let us desire God, let us train our souls in spiritual exercises, to grow wings, in the hope that the Lord will count us worthy, that he'll have pity on us, and open, even for us, the gates of his mercy. And he will! Let us do whatever we can, so that we can attain the first goal: to fight the fight, the struggle with God, as we said at the beginning of this address. This is as much a struggle for me as it is for you. If I were rich, you would be rich also. But since I am poor, you are poor, too. Precisely for this reason, let us make this effort together.

Let me go back to where I began. We've done nothing! We'll have fooled ourselves, and God, and the whole world, unless we achieve this. This is why I entreat you, my children: from now on our life together should be ordered toward this end. How will we struggle with God? Certainly not against him, but for him, so that we can reach him. Let us begin to pray, to practice self-control and abstinence; let us begin to rejoice a little in God, as hearts of flesh do, when they leap at the sight of those they love.

I beg and beseech you: come to me for confession, come to me in my cell, and with such desires let's begin our spiritual journey; let's undertake our spiritual, ascetic discipline, because that's the only thing that produces real monks, who are dwelling places of the Holy Spirit, and not "unmonastic monks". But in order to be able to talk, when you come to see me, we must have the desire and disposition to abandon

whatever we realize is "refuse" (Phil 3.8) for the sake of the love of God. If you come laden with earthly cares and caught up in the routine and the commonplace, I won't be able to do anything for you or say anything to you. Because there'll be no common ground between what you're experiencing and seeking what you say you've come for. I won't be able to say a thing to you, and won't be able to help you at all, if, in reality, you've come to me for other reasons.

When, for example, you come to me and say "Elder, what sort of program should I follow; how much should I pray?" and at the same time you're upset, because they forgot to set a place for you in the refectory, or they gave you less food, or you went without food altogether, or because someone was rude to you, or because you didn't get your way with something, or because what you thought would happen didn't, or because your body didn't get its rest, or because your stomach hurts or your head aches, or because something has happened at home, what am I supposed to say to you about prayer? You're not concerned about it. You're thinking about something else. It's all north and south, east and west, heaven and earth, with nothing in common between them.

Let us begin, then, my children, so that we can all know the joy of living in a monastery which is really a place, not where bodies are rested, but where souls are schooled; not a place where we've come to make ourselves comfortable and lead tidy little lives, as other men do. But let us become "flames of fire", as his "ministers" are (Ps 103.4), so that we can become his ministers, too. For only the flame rises upwards, while the flesh descends to the earth. Remember the miracle of the First Ecumenical Synod (A.D. 325): the flame went upwards and the earth remained below<sup>8</sup>. Let us leave the earth below and let us become like flames of fire, so that we too can ascend to where God is.

<sup>8</sup> Life of St. Spyridon, from the *Great Synaxarion*, vol. 12 (Athens, 1991), 348-49. In order to illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity, the "saint took a brick in his left hand, and with his right made the sign of the cross. As he said, 'In the name of the Father', a flame immediately leapt from the baked brick and ascended to heaven. When he said, 'and of the Son', all the water used in its manufacture trickled out. And when he said, 'and of the Holy Spirit', there was nothing left in his hand but the earth which had gone into its making".

## THE PRAYER OF THE HOLY MOUNTAIN\*

Prayer is the primary need of every soul. It is a tree of life which nourishes us, and renders us incorruptible, because it enables us to partake in the life of the incorruptible God. Just as there can be no human life without a soul, there can be no life in Christ apart from prayer. Noetic prayer is the unceasing activity of the angelic orders: it is the bread, the life, and the language of those non-material beings. It is an expression of their love for God. Monks, by imitating such a life in their flesh, and by means of their ascetic struggles, inhabit the realm of angels, and set ablaze their desire for the divine by unceasing prayer of the heart.

And this is why, throughout history, we see many monks who, for hours and even days, forget to eat, and indeed forget their very selves, being wholly devoted to noetic contemplation of the Lord. Many times men have knocked on their doors, and the birds have signaled the rising of the sun, but the saints heard nothing, because their mind was caught up in exalted communion with God. Prayer for them is the most spiritual of activities, offered to the Father and Creator of the world; it is the warming of their heart, a rising up to heavenly things. Prayer is the monk's embrace of, and tender greeting to, the Bridegroom and savior of our souls.

The Church lives by prayer. It lives by the prayers of its children. There are, of course, many kinds of prayer. But if we want to know what is the supreme form of prayer, which unfailingly maintains its spiritual character "at all times and at every hour", then we must look to the monks, those "children of the church who bear the form of light". As St. Isaac the Syrian tells us, monasticism is the "boast of the Church", because it is an incarnate and living expression of the Gospel<sup>1</sup>. Monasticism is the Church's sacred treasury, in which her teachings are kept

\* *Ascetical Homily* 10 (ed. Nikephoros Theotokis [Athens, n.d.], p. 43; cf. *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* [Boston, Mass., 1984], p. 77).



intact, her devotion true, the spirit of her martyrs whole, her spiritual tradition unadulterated, her mission active and effective, and the sweet delight of her song constant. By means of this song she beckons the beloved Christ, and captures the dove of purest light, the Holy Spirit, "who proceeds from the Father" (cf. Jn 15.26).

In order to learn how the Church maintains her prayer, her divine voice, within monasticism, there is no need to travel very far, either to the East or to the West. Right here, in our own neighborhood, we have the Holy Mountain, the sacred, spirit-bearing vessel of Orthodox tradition; the life-raft thrown to us by God, upon which many are constantly saved from the stormy sea of sin, and carried to the kingdom of God.

And who does not know, who has not heard, of the Prayer of the Holy Mountain? It consists of a short phrase, a small number of words. By means of its initial cry "Lord", we glorify God in his glorious majesty, for he is the king of Israel, the creator of "all things visible and invisible", before whom the seraphim and the cherubim tremble.

By the most sweet invocation and vocalization of the name "Jesus", we bear witness to the fact that Christ, our savior, is present, and in gratitude we thank him for granting us eternal life. With the third word, "Christ", we speak theologically, confessing Christ as the Son of God and God. It was not a mere man who saved us, neither was it an angel, but Jesus Christ, the true God (cf. Heb 1-2).

Through the inward petition, "have mercy on me", we fall down and implore God to be merciful, to answer our pleas for salvation, and fulfill the desires and needs of our hearts. And that one little word: "me"! What a breadth of meaning it contains! It designates not only myself, but all those who have been naturalized into the state of Christ, into the Holy Church; all those, that is, who are members of his body (cf. Eph 5.25).

Finally, and so that our prayer will be complete, we end with the words, "the sinner", thereby confessing our sinfulness—for we are all sinners—as did the saints, who through such confession became sons of light and sons of the day.

From this we realize that prayer consists of praise, thanksgiving, theology, petition, and confession.

What can we say, my beloved, concerning the Prayer of the Heart, when nowadays, thank God, it is spoken of everywhere, and innumerable books about it are published? Now even small children know it

and say it; and young and old alike are saved by it. There are some, however, who have been deceived by false religions and pseudo-prophets, and promote their own supposed methods of prayer, which are in fact carnal, false, and demonic. We are therefore obliged to uncover the true riches of our treasure, which is the prayer of the mind, the recollection and invocation of the Divine Name.

Through prayer, the Church through the ages speaks to God and inspires her children, making them like God. The Prayer of the Heart, in particular, is something which fills all of creation, including the vastness of the human heart.

Permit me, before I continue, to tell you about a certain monk I once knew. Just as all of us have moments of difficulty, he too was passing through a very critical period of his life: difficult days! The devil had cast fire into his brain, and the opposing forces wanted to strip him of his monastic dignity and make him a pseudo-seeker of truth. His soul roared like breaking waves, and he sought deliverance from his distress. From time to time he remembered the prayer of the mind, but it resounded only weakly within him, for he didn't believe in it. His immediate surroundings were of no help whatsoever. Everything was negative. How wretched man becomes when he is beset by problems! And who among us has not known such terrible days, such dark nights, and agonizing trials?

Our monk didn't know what to do. Walks did nothing for him. The night stifled him. And one night, gasping for air, he threw open the window of his cell in order to take a deep breath. It was dark—about three in the morning. In his great weariness, he was about to close the window, hoping to get at least a few moments of rest. At that very moment, however, it was as if everything around him—even the darkness outside—had become light! He looked to see where such light might be coming from, but it was coming from nowhere. The darkness, which has no existence of its own, had become light, and even his heart was shining with it. And when he turned around, he saw that his cell had also become light! He examined the lamp to see if this light was coming from there, but that single oil lamp could not become light itself, neither could it make all things light!

Although he did not previously have light in his heart, he did have a certain hope. Overcome with surprise and moved by this hope, but without being fully aware of what he was doing, he went out into the

black courtyard of the monastery, which had often seemed to him like hell. He went out into the silence, into the night. Everything was clear as day. Nothing was hidden in the darkness. Everything was in the light: the wooden beams and the windows, the church, the ground he walked on, the sky, the spring of water which flowed continuously, the crickets, the fireflies, the birds of the night—everything was visible, everything! And the stars came down and the sky lowered itself, and it seemed to him that everything—earth and heaven—had become a heaven! And everything together was chanting the Prayer, everything was saying the Prayer. And his heart strangely opened and began to dance; it began to beat and to take part involuntarily in the same prayer, and his feet barely touched the ground.

He did not know how he opened the door and entered the church, or when he had vested; he did not know when some other monk, and old man, had come along, or when the Liturgy began, or when the other monks arrived. What exactly happened he didn't know. Gone was the ordinary connection of things, and he knew only that he was standing before the altar, before the invisibly present God, celebrating the Liturgy. And striking, as it were, the keys of both his heart and the altar, his voice resounded above, to the altar beyond the heavens. The Liturgy continued, the church was lit by lamps in a most mystical way. The Gospel was read. The light was no longer all around him, but had built its nest within his heart. The Liturgy ended, but the song begun by his heart was endless. In his ecstasy, he saw that heaven and earth sing this prayer without ceasing, and that the monk truly lives only when he is animated by it. For this to happen, he needs only to cease living for himself.

The Psalmist is right in saying that the Name of God gives us life (cf. Ps 142.11). And how beautifully St. Gregory of Sinai puts it when he says that prayer is like a fire of gladness, a fragrant light, the message of the Apostles, the good news of God, the assurance of the heart, the knowledge of God, exultation in Jesus, the joy of the soul, the mercy of God, a ray from the spiritual sun, and the grace of God. Indeed: "Prayer is God, working all things in everything"<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> *Edifying Chapters* 113 (PG 150.1277D-1280A).

Yes. It is true. Through prayer, the Church through the ages speaks to God and inspires her children, making them like God. The echo of prayer fills all creation, and its action works effectively for the renewal of the world.

What, then, are we to say about this wonderful gift of divine grace, which has been given to us? About this prayer which is so greatly honored on the Holy Mountain? Let us say a few words about its meaning, and cast a glance at its history. Let us also consider its spiritual prerequisites, along with a number of social obligations, which are indispensable for the life of prayer.



In the Old Testament, God requires the people of Israel to "sanctify his Name". In Isaiah, for example, it says that "they will sanctify my name" (Isa 29.23). Eight hundred years before Christ, God said through this prophet: "They will render glory to me, and confess me as the only holy one, calling upon my awesome Name, worthy of supreme praise". This "calling upon the awesome Name" is prayer. It is the blessing, glorification, and worship of God.

Elsewhere, the Old Testament says that "in his Name we glory" (Ecc 50.20), to it we "give thanks" (Ecc 51.1), in it is "our deliverance" (Ecc 51.3), through it "we are saved" (Jl 3.5), and in it is the "glory of our strength" (Ps 88.17), because wherever the Name of the Lord is uttered, there the Lord is present.

In the New Testament, the Lord teaches us that we should make our requests to God in his Name, the name of Christ (Jn 15.16). The Apostle Paul, moreover, says that God has given the Son a Name which is "above all other names", so that in his Name we should pray to and worship God (cf. Phil 2.9-11). And he urges that our prayer should be "unceasing" (1 Thess 5.17).

The Apostolic Father, Hermas, desiring that the Name of Jesus be perpetually in our mind and heart, says that we should be "bound" with the Name of Christ, as if we have put on a garment that we will never remove<sup>3</sup>.

St. Basil the Great knew of and spoke about the prayer of the heart, in the same words that we use for it today, and he says that it was the

<sup>3</sup> *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Parable 9.16 (BEPES, vol. 3 [Athens, 1955], p. 96, lines 10-11).

universal prayer of the Church. And St. John Chrysostom directs us to "cry aloud from morning till evening: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon us"<sup>4</sup>.

Let us recall some of the ascetic fathers who stress nothing so much as prayer. We all know that triad of saints, John Climacus, equal to the angels; Isaac the Syrian, who enraptures you; and Symeon the New Theologian, clothed in the Spirit. They successfully teach the art of prayer to those living in the desert, to those living in monasteries, and to those living in the world. Let us also recall those other eagles, St. Neilos who soared on high; St. Barsanouphios and John, gifted with discernment; and the wonderful St. Diadochos of Photike.

And what should we say concerning Gregory of Sinai, who in the fourteenth century brought the Prayer from Egypt, brought it to life, and cultivated it on the Holy Mountain? It goes without saying that the Jesus Prayer was practiced on the Holy Mountain before his arrival. Indeed, devotees of the Prayer were never absent from the Mountain, beginning with the very first hermits, which is why Hesychasm was acknowledged as the highest path of the spiritual life. But Gregory tirelessly traveled across heaven and earth, on the Mountain and elsewhere, to disseminate it, and make it the daily practice of all the monks. And who has not heard of the famous Maximos Kafsokalyvites? Or of the great Gregory Palamas, who magnificently wove together the doctrinal and practical aspects of the Orthodox teaching on prayer? And what of St. Kallistos, and the Patriarchs Isidore and Philotheos, and so many others, such as Theoleptos of Philadelphia, Kallistos and Ignatius Xanthopoulos, all of whom both in theory and practice lived, applied the experience of, and wrote about, prayer? And what could we possibly single out from everything written about prayer by that new mystagogue of prayer and the patristic mind, St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain? His *Handbook of Spiritual Counsel* and the *Philokalia* are now classic guides known throughout the entire world.

Let us now turn our attention to the place of prayer in a monastery, in order to see how it relates to the life of the monk, and how it might relate to us. We know that a monastery is an unceasing gathering (*synaxis*)

of both the particular brotherhood and of the entire, universal Church. There would be no reason for monasteries to exist if they were not a perpetual gathering of the Church, realizing the presence of Christ in a particular time and place. It follows, then, that the center of monastic life is the daily cycle of worship, and especially the Divine Liturgy. It is in the Liturgy that the monk becomes familiar with, and makes his own the Church's spirit of martyrdom, asceticism, and worship. The liturgical texts and services nourish him, and they become his personal experiences.

The monks assemble in the church, knowing that they are not alone, but in the company of all the saints and angels, glorifying God, and honoring the saint of the day. The Holy Eucharist, along with the entire liturgical gathering, provides them with a profound sense that God is present, and that they partake of him sacramentally, by means of his uncreated energies. The invisibility of God, moreover, far from being a hindrance to their devotion, is in direct proportion to the palpable nature of their mystical communion and spiritual delight.

This communion with God in worship, which is of primary importance for the monk, continues in the cell and everywhere else by means of the Prayer of the Heart, which is not simply a form of request or petition. If it were only this, there would be no need for us to spend all day addressing ourselves to God, since God hears even our entrails when they move. The Prayer of the Heart is the food of Christ, the Lamb of God, who is present in the recollection and invocation of his divine, terrifying, and sweetest Name. It is also the drink of Christ, the intoxicating new wine of grace, which raises man to the heights. We partake of the whole Christ, and we are found to reflect the attributes of God, being made god-like by God, enlightened and mystically enlivened.

The monk, through his noetic "liturgy", as the holy Fathers call it, "truly and continually partakes of spiritual manna"<sup>5</sup>. The Jesus Prayer is the fulfillment, here and now, of that which was symbolized and foreshadowed by God's distribution of life-giving bread to the Israelites. They called that bread "manna", which means "What is it?" for, as scripture says, "they did not know what it was" (Ex 16.14-15, 31). And it received an unintelligible name, so that they would understand that the bread which God sent down from heaven was symbolic. And we too

<sup>4</sup> *Letter to the Monks* (PG 60.752). Traditionally ascribed to Chrysostom, this letter may date to a slightly later period.

<sup>5</sup> Kallistos Kataphygiotes, *On Divine Union and the Contemplative Life* (PG 147.913C).

can say: "What great thing is this prayer, this recollection of Jesus? It is mystical communion with Christ, offered at every moment, as when the flakes of manna fell down from heaven, and the people ate it, and were glad". Our manna, then, is the Jesus Prayer, our food and our drink, satisfying us with nourishment from heaven.

It follows that a basic condition for the Prayer of the Heart is the belief that it is not merely a prayer, but rather true communion with God. It is the basis for our divinization through the divine energies of the unapproachable God, who through them descends and unites himself to sinners. And when we have God, we have the Father and the Son together with the Holy Spirit. The incarnate Word himself, the king of the heavens, who holds the universe on the tip of his finger, consents to be held by us! And he enters into our midst, dwelling and moving and walking about within us. Just as when the disciples caught a multitude of fish on the Sea of Tiberias, and John said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" (Jn 21.7), we too, when we cast forth the nets of prayer, can repeat those same words with complete conviction—"It is the Lord!"—because the Church assures us that it is he. Here he is! Present truly is God himself!

But in order for the believer to be filled with light, and to be illumined by the presence of the Lord, his way of life must be pleasing to God. Since he wants God, he must live in a godly manner. He needs to flee from all human wretchedness and self-pity, empower himself with divine strength, learn self-control and restraint, and become a vessel capable of containing the grace of God. Moreover, he must want to be cleansed from every sin, being assured by the word of truth that this is something attainable. Through the cooperation of his free will with divine grace, he can be brought to a state of impassibility, and become increasingly like God.



Now, if we wish to devote ourselves to the Jesus Prayer, we must also recognize that we have a problem. We are imprisoned within the confines of our worries and concerns. We are always in a hurry. We get tired. We become disillusioned. We live with stress, we are troubled by disturbing thoughts, by our passions, by inner storms. In order to sleep, we need to be on the point of exhaustion; and in order to be happy, we have to listen to music, or find some other amusement. This is no life at

all! It tires us out, and doesn't allow us to pray as much and in the way that we want.

This is why the Fathers assure us that the words of God "refresh and strengthen the soul, as wine strengthens the body"<sup>6</sup>. Know that the word of God is to be found both in Scripture and in the Holy Fathers. We must diligently study both; and among the latter, the ascetic Fathers particularly. We must likewise always be attentive to our work, not squandering our strength needlessly, but expending it responsibly on the duties which are before us. In this way our life will become a daily spiritual exercise, and, coupled with spiritual study, will smooth the ground of the soul, rendering it capable of rising upwards.

In order to pray, you need to cultivate one important quality. Just as we look after the health of our body, so too should we attend to the health of the soul. It is necessary that we should be joyful. When we become accustomed to pray, the joy of Christ is granted to us, along with much else besides. If you're sad when you're praying, if you're depressed, then something inside you isn't right. You should look to it, give it your attention, because a person's character plays an important role in prayer.

Listen to what fine things were said about St. Savvas of Vatopedi, who underwent the greatest sufferings: "He was most joyful in conversation, and in appearance exceedingly gentle and charming"<sup>7</sup>. In his dealings with others, he always had a bright smile, the sweetest face, and the whole of him was filled with grace. How much more so in his dealings with God, when, during prayer, he became like a bright sun!

Another ascetic Father, St. Neilos, tells us that "prayer is a matter of joy and thanksgiving"<sup>8</sup>. Do you want to know if your prayer is true? Take note of this: does exultation spring from your heart, does it move you to thanksgiving? For "when you are at prayer, and it produces a joy beyond all else, then you have truly found prayer"<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ephrem the Syrian, cited in Paul the Monk, *Evergetinos*, vol. 2 (Athens, 1978), qu. 11.6, p. 121; and John of Damascus, *Sacra Parallela* (PG 96.217B).

<sup>7</sup> Philotheos Kokkinos, *Life of St. Savvas the Younger* 28 (ed. Demetrios Tsamis, *The Hagiographical Works of Philotheos Kokkinos of Constantinople* [Thessaloniki: Center for Byzantine Studies, 1985], p. 214, lines 12-13).

<sup>8</sup> *On Prayer* 15 (PG 79.1169D; cf. *Philokalia*, vol. 1 [London: Faber & Faber, 1979], p. 58).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 153 (PG 79.1200BC; cf. *Philokalia*, p. 71).



Prayer, then, because it is communion with God, brings joy. Of course, we need to struggle against sin, and against our passions. But this should not discourage us, since we have surrendered our life to Jesus Christ. However, struggle is necessary if our life is to be blessed. If we wish to succeed at prayer, we should not harbor any bitterness against anyone, we should not get mixed up in another person's life, create stress for them, or hurt anyone's feelings or upset them. Neither should we be upset by anyone else. All our social interactions should be natural and simple. We should feel that all people are one and the same, considering ourselves to be "one self with all"<sup>10</sup>, without, of course, denying our beliefs or departing from our proper conduct. Then prayer is easy. It is enough for us to let God work in us, just as the farmer sows the seed and waits for the gentle rain.

We will therefore continue to struggle. We will call to mind the Name of Jesus, some with the lips, others with the mind, still others with the mind in the heart, and others as divine grace grants them when it visits them, when their spirit flashes like lightning, and, crying out, they encounter God. If we do all these things, God will drop the dew of Hermon into our soul and will make us joyful and true.

It is worth devoting much time, indeed as much time as we can, to putting into practice the patristic saying: "compel yourself to pray much"<sup>11</sup>, leaving everything else to the Lord. And if we can say only one prayer, even this has value. Moreover, St. Isaac the Syrian says, "consider every prayer which you utter in the night to be of greater worth than all the activity of the day"<sup>12</sup>. And thus our one, small prayer is even more precious when it is offered during the night.

Leave everything to God. Get on with your work and let your mind be on prayer! And choose a good guide, who can lead you by the hand to Christ. We must, however, stress that with respect to the spiritual life, all things are done for us by the grace of God, and thus we should be at peace.

The Fathers tell us that the invocation of the Name of Jesus, the practice of the prayer of the heart, is like a flask of myrrh. You open it,

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 125 (PG 79.1193C; cf. *Philokalia*, p. 69).

<sup>11</sup> Abba Isaiah, *Discourse* 4.1 (ed. Augustinos Iordanites [Jerusalem, 1911], p. 15).

<sup>12</sup> *Ascetical Homily* 64 (ed. Theotokis, p. 147; cf. *The Ascetical Homilies of Isaac the Syrian*, p. 308).

you pour some out, and the place is filled with fragrance. When you cry out: "Lord Jesus Christ", the fragrance of the Holy Spirit is given off, and you receive a "pledge of the divine Spirit". This is because the "Holy Spirit, suffering together with us, descends, and is moved to the desire for spiritual prayer"<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, the Spirit prays instead of us, if we are able to forget about ourselves. Then he takes on our failings, our impurities, and the whole poverty of our existence. When we pray, we become temples of God, and priestly ministers of a great mystery. In the beautiful words of one Church Father, "take a censer and offer incense, because Christ is here in your heart, from which the words 'Lord Jesus Christ' rise like the sun". Elsewhere he says that "when we hear the sound of the censer, let us remember that we are a temple, and let us feel in our minds that we are offering incense to Christ, who is within us, and thus let us venerate the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit"<sup>14</sup>.

Just think: within us is the kingdom of God, his dwelling place, where we "confine that which has no body within a body", so that the "worship of heavenly things" takes place within our hearts<sup>15</sup>. We acquire God, and God is inseparably bound up with all the saints, for they, like us, have all been nourished on the same milk, having been fed at the breast of the Holy Spirit. Thus the saints are our brothers and friends. They wait for us, love us, and secure our blessedness, as the Prophet Isaiah says: "Blessed is he who has relatives and friends in Jerusalem" (Isa 31.9). We acquire as our friends and relatives all the saints of Christ, who live above, in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Do you remember the words of Christ? "There are some standing here, who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mk 9.1). This is applicable to us, too. We live, that is, we experience "in power", the kingdom of God, when we say the Prayer of Jesus. And when we do, the Spirit makes us worthy to know God. And the saints attain to Christ, about whom some think that no one sees, and no one knows. And yet! ... through prayer we understand that which is beyond understanding, namely, the "incomprehensible and transcen-

<sup>13</sup> St. Neilos the Ascetic, *On Prayer* 63 (PG 79.1180C; cf. *Philokalia*, p. 63).

<sup>14</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* (ed. Herbert Musurillo, GNO VII.1 [Leiden: Brill, 1964], p. 94, lines 17-19; cf. Abraham J. Malherbe, trans., Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* [New York, 1978], 100-101).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

dently radiant content of our God"<sup>16</sup>, because the grace of the Spirit wells up from every fount, initiating us into the unspeakable beauty of God.

And if we don't reach as far as that, the Prayer of the Heart will nevertheless bring us abundant blessings, consolation, pleasure, forgiveness, and salvation, to each as it is best for him. This is what God gives.

And if we have not enjoyed such fruits, it does not mean that others have not tasted of them. The saints many times beheld the glimmerings of the Godhead, for God revealed himself to them as light! God is hidden. No one sees him. This is why he is said to be within a "thick cloud", or "shrouded in darkness" (cf. Ex 19.9). God is light, but to us he is invisible. Even so, to the extent that God has revealed himself, many saints have seen God, who filled them with his own, holy light.

This is clear from the Life of St. Savvas, who we mentioned a moment ago. He was filled with divine longing. And while he sat in silence, his heart seeking God, suddenly God appeared to him, and said "I am here!"<sup>17</sup> Look at me, it is I! How grand and godlike! And how did God appear to him? In what manner? In what form? How? As "light flowing from heaven in abundance"<sup>18</sup>. Light, we are told, enveloped everything. It entered into him, first dominating his mind, afterwards his senses, and then covered all the members of his body.

After that, the saint was so radiant, so fragrant, that people flocked in the thousands to see him, to imbibe the fragrance, to partake of it, and they painted his image on planks—on "planks and boards", it says—while he was still alive. They treated him and honored him as a saint, because they saw the sanctity portrayed on his face<sup>19</sup>.

And the Life goes on: "Take care, because these are the mysteries of the Lord. The Godhead appears in all its beauty, in all its glory, in all its unspeakable delight, and its light transforms the man upon whom it is poured forth"<sup>20</sup>. Such a man can see God, and all those things beyond the heavens which eye has not seen.

After this, the saint, "wounded by the sweet arrow of the Lord"<sup>21</sup>, speaks to the light:

<sup>16</sup> St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names* 1.8 (PG 3.597A).

<sup>17</sup> *Life of St. Savvas* 26 (ed. Tsamis, p. 210, line 6).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, line 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 36 (p. 230, line 15), and 28 (p. 214, line 4).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 34 (p. 225, line 1).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 37 (p. 231, line 13).

"Where do you dwell, and upon whom do you look? Show me your glory, so that I may know you (Ex 33.13). I want to see you as you are". And then he heard a voice:

"But you have been completely divinized by partaking in due measure of the Godhead<sup>22</sup>. There is no need for me to tell you where I dwell—I who am God—for you yourself have become God, receiving my light from me".

How many times, my dear friends, have the saints seen this light, even if we have never seen it ourselves? But it is enough that you say the Prayer, and abide with Christ. These are the fruits of the Prayer of the Holy Mountain.

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Finally, let us see how prayer is lived and experienced on the Holy Mountain.

There is an ascetic on the Holy Mountain—I won't give you his name; he is still living—who is given to saying: "Ach! Twenty-four hours a day aren't enough for me to pray!" Do you sense what sort of prayer this man practices? Do you realize how far above the earth he is? Can you imagine what sweetness he feels as he turns his eyes and his heart increasingly toward God?

Yes, they pray on the Holy Mountain, in the monasteries and outside the monasteries. Great figures have emerged in recent years, such as Daniel Katounakiotes (†1929); Kallinikos the Hesychast (†1930), and so many others. One of our own monks, blessed Old Arsenios, who fell asleep a few years ago, didn't even want to sleep, but rigged himself up by a rope, and leaned on a piece of wood, in order to pray without ceasing. Many monks have done this. When he prayed and made prostrations, he would bang his head on the floor. He said: "I'm a sinner and God won't hear my prayer, but at least let him hear the banging of my head. My sin is so great that prayer doesn't dare come out of my mouth!" And yet he had such grace! He prayed constantly. You should have seen his face. And if you could have seen how he fell asleep, you would have said, "truly, the death of a righteous man is blessed".

More recently there was another ascetic. He often needed hours to

<sup>22</sup> St. Maximos the Confessor, *On Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God* 2.88 (PG 90.1168AB; cf. *Philokalia*, vol. 2 [London: Faber & Faber, 1981], p. 160).

celebrate the liturgy, because he was visited by the saints, who celebrated with him. Sometimes he took so long that he sent his disciples away, so that he could be alone, and they wouldn't be startled. And when his ecstasy ended, he would open the door and say, "let's resume the Liturgy".

Another monk was praying at night, during the office, when a remarkable thing happened. His mind left his body and flew out over the sea, it went to the mountains and the valleys, looked at the trees, the flowers, the fish of the sea, and saw and heard that everything in creation glorifies God. From that day forward he was unable to stand at all, and from his darting eyes, tears never ceased to flow. He saw, and said, that creation, even though it lacks a soul, pours out tearful praises to God, "whereas I, who have a soul, am lost in sin".

Hesychasts and ascetics, in unbroken succession, have never been absent from the Holy Mountain, down to the present day and hour. Let us call to mind St. Silouan (†1938), whose entire life was a constantly flourishing prayer. More recently, Elder Joseph Spelaiotes (†1959) devoted his life to prayer, which he absorbed deeply. He made it his strength, and experienced it as the sweetness of paradise. He is survived by many spiritual children and grandchildren.

From the Holy Mountain, the Prayer of Jesus has been communicated to the world. It was from here that St. Paisius Velitchkovski (†1794) gave the Prayer to the Slavs. Father Sophronios, also an Athonite, has done the same thing in Europe.

Athos also influenced St. Athanasios of Meteora, as well as St. Dionysios of Olympus, and they inspired many others, who cannot be numbered. Symeon Monochiton, Iakovos the Elder, St. Theonas, the Kollyvades ... the Prayer has hastened into the entire world. And so there are Holy Mountains in Russia! And in Serbia there are Holy Mountains! Wherever you go. In Europe there are now monasteries populated by Athonites, and they do nothing else but disseminate the Jesus Prayer, as much as they are able.

## EPILOGUE

What would our life be like, dear friends, without the Prayer of Jesus? And what would the world be without it? A heart which does not have this prayer seems to me to be like a plastic bag—now you put something into it, but it will soon tear and you'll throw it away. That which gives meaning to our life, to our existence, is prayer, because it is prayer which gives us God. They say that life will come to an end when men cease to pray. But is it possible for them ever to stop praying? No. Because there will always be those who love the Lord. And as long as such souls exist, the world will not be lost. Unceasing prayer is the hidden life of the world. And thus the world will not perish, but will be renewed, and just as it now "groans in travail" because of the corruption of nature (cf. Rom 8.22), so too, when the new earth and the new heaven appear (2 Pet 3.13), it will rejoice in the eternal joy and glory of the human race, made radiant in the outpouring of divine light.

Let us pray. Let us mystically keep our censers burning, because, as we said, when we keep the Name of Jesus on our lips or in our heart, we become tabernacles of God, we become Godbearers.

Solomon says somewhere that God chose for his dwelling place the sun, the created light—but God, who is uncreated light—left it! It was not possible even for a vast and dazzling star to be the dwelling place of the great God. And so God left the sun, and made the "dark cloud" his dwelling place, clothing himself in darkness and invisibility. Now, if we cannot look at the sun, how would we look at Christ, full of light, the sun of life, who transcends all creation? And so he hides himself in invisibility, so that we can be free, and believe, and choose God. When Solomon set about building his temple, he gathered together materials of gold, silver, emeralds, and whatever else was most precious, expending more wealth than any one since in order to make a house for God. When he was finished, however, he said that he had prepared another house for God "to dwell in anew" (1 Kg 8.53 [LXX]). That new house is the Church.

My dear friends, we too have a house for the Lord to dwell in: our heart. Do you remember what the Lord said when he ascended into

heaven? "I will be with you always" (Mt 28.20). And this is why, during the last living act of the Liturgy, the elevation of the sacred Chalice, the priest says: "Forever, now and always, and unto the ages of ages". What does that mean? It is as if Christ is saying: I am going away. I am entering into my dark cloud, I am returning to my invisibility, and you will lose sight of me. But remember that I am always before you, I am always within you. I will remain here unseen, unobserved, in the innermost parts of the sanctuary, to be eaten by the priest, so that you can eat me too, whenever you want.

And so, my dear brothers, make ready your spiritual censers, and procure fragrances for your souls, because God has chosen neither the sun, nor the temple of Solomon, which he permitted to be destroyed. Why? Because he wanted his house to be, through prayer, the heart of each of us.

## THE DIVINE LITURGY: THE WINDOW OF HEAVEN\*

Today, my beloved, I propose to do something rather daring. I will attempt something which is certainly beyond my abilities. But I will do so out of love for those who have so often, and with so much attention and devotion, listened to me preach in this sacred place.

The subject which concerns us today is the spiritual life, a life which is inspired, guided, directed, and imbued by the Holy Spirit. It is a journey to heaven. The one who undertakes such a journey rises up to heaven, even though he still walks upon the earth. Going about his ordinary tasks, he celebrates a feast in heaven. He travels on the wings of the Holy Spirit, and his aim, his desire, his vibrancy, and daily concern is heaven.

But how often do we even think of heaven, living as we do amidst so many pleasures, and absorbed by so many trivial things? Our various preoccupations, like magnets, pull on our hearts, and make heaven appear too lofty for us to reach; something beyond our grasp and unattainable by any means. And if a person is lacking in spiritual experiences, if he has not turned his heart to heaven, if he has not visited there from time to time, or cast so much as a glance in that direction, then the danger is even greater. When people talk to you about a certain person, you may likely feel joy or longing for him. If, however, you don't actually see that person, then the possibility exists that you'll soon forget him. If, on the other hand, you do see him, it's very likely that your heart will love him, that it will attach itself to him, and that, from then on, you'll keep him constantly in your thoughts. It's the same with heaven. If only we could turn our gaze there, even for a moment, and catch a glimpse of its breadth, its beauty, its joy, and its grandeur! It would certainly be very difficult for our soul to forget such a thing. But how can we see heaven?

When the Israelites wanted to enter the city of Jericho, which they greatly desired to conquer, they knew it would not be easy for them to

\* A Sermon delivered in the church of St. Nicholas, Trikala, Greece, 31 January, 1971.



breach its high walls. So what did they do? They sent spies to bring back fruit from its fields. And the spies indeed brought back large clusters of grapes (Num 13.1-2). They also brought back some of its treasures, some of its precious stones, and a selection of its beautiful things. When the Jews saw them, their hearts were won over, and they said: "We will conquer our enemies". Then they stormed the walls, and, with God's help, tore them down and captured the city (Josh 6.1-20). If only we could open a window into heaven, and gaze upon it, and—if we found it pleasing—leap forward and enter in to see what might be there, to make it ours, to conquer it!

This is the act of daring which I would like to attempt today. Will I succeed? I've already told you that it is beyond my powers. Pray, then, that God will give me the words I need. And pray also that he will, at the same time, open your hearts, so that you will understand what I cannot tell you as I would like.

If you want to look upon some superb prospect situated on the other side of a mountain, what would you do? You'd climb up to some fine summit, and from there you'd let your eye range over all the beautiful places you were longing to see. That's what we'll do today. We've all come to church, to the temple of God, precisely to the place, that is, from where we can easily behold heaven, a region which is made radiant, beautiful, and adorned by the unfading light of the Godhead which shines with a threefold brightness.

The church, my beloved, in which we have gathered, along with every church, is a type, a sketch, a model, an image, a piece of heaven. When we're in church, we truly feel that we're in heaven. Why is that great dome placed above us? Precisely to raise our heart to heaven. Why are these Royal Doors here, which open at the start of the Liturgy? To show us how the heavens open up before us. Why is the church full of crosses? Why, up there, is Christ depicted celebrating the Liturgy? To show us that, when we are here, we are transported to heaven. Truly, but in a mystical manner, we experience in church moments of heaven.

This is why Saint Gregory Palamas says that the church "resides on high, being an angelic and transcendent place". It is an angelic and transcendent place that we are in now. The church, he tells us, "raises man to heaven, and presents him to the God who is above all"<sup>1</sup>. The church

<sup>1</sup> St. Gregory Palamas, *Sermon on the Publican and the Pharisee* (ed. Panayiotis Chrestou (EPE, vol. 9 [Thessaloniki, 1985], p. 50).

takes us and raises us up and presents us to God himself. But is that what we feel? Is that our experience? When we come to church, does our soul have the means of perception necessary to sense and grasp these realities? What sort of people have we become? We know all the breeds of dogs and horses, we know the species of plants, the makes of motor cars and radios, but we often fail to know those things which have a direct bearing on our life. And so I want you to pay attention to what I will tell you today.

If we think about it carefully, we will realize that, whatever exists around us—the unfathomable depths of the sea, the heights of the heavens, the myriads of stars—all of this is nothing more than the poor little neighborhood of our planet. One day, it will all be gone. You've seen how the old houses are reduced to rubble when they want to build new apartment blocks. One day, everything in the universe will collapse just like that. Nothing will remain. There will be only the spiritual heaven, where Christ dwells. Let us, then, fix our gaze there.

We find ourselves in church. As we've said, it is the most suitable place from which to look at heaven. But where is the window? How are we to open it? The answer is simple. The window is the Divine Liturgy which we are celebrating. We aim to turn our eyes toward spiritual things. Let us therefore turn our soul to the Holy Spirit, and let us ask him to shine his light on the darkness of our thoughts. When he does, we will be able to feel, to believe, to understand, and make our own, everything which is said and done during the Divine Liturgy.

You have taken so much trouble to come here, and on such a cold day! And you are standing! Your efforts should not be wasted. And so let us ask the Spirit of God that not a single, unclear thought remain within us. We shouldn't leave church if our hearts haven't worshipped God, if we don't feel that our souls have been thrust into heaven, if we have not seen all that happens here.

At the conclusion of every Divine Liturgy, you should feel what a saint of our Church once said: "Now you have ravished my soul, and I cannot contain your flame, so having sung a hymn to you, I go on my way"<sup>2</sup>. O my God, he says, I have felt you, I have listened to you, I've seen you alongside me; I have felt you pierce my heart with your arrows, set fire to my soul, light a flame which I cannot bear. And so I sing a

<sup>2</sup> St. John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 30 (PG 88.1160B).

hymn to you, and continue on my way, taking you with me. You will teach us the truth in all its fullness.

Our window, then, is the Divine Liturgy, with which we are so familiar, which we have grown up with since childhood, and the like of which does not exist on earth or in heaven.

How does the Liturgy begin? "Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen". Why does the priest begin the Liturgy with these words? What do they mean? With these words, Christ unveils for us a marvelous sight. He presents us with a heavenly vision. Before our very eyes he opens up his kingdom. It's like going to a shop, and the shopkeeper unfolds a bolt of fabric, and you look at it, you feel it, you test its strength, you see its beauty and you say, "I'll buy that". This is what Christ does at the beginning of the Liturgy. Before our very eyes he opens up his kingdom for us to see it, for us to feel it, for us to be satisfied, and to say: "This is what I choose for my life". This is what our soul should feel at the beginning of every Liturgy. But does it?

The priest is aware of this while standing at the altar table. His heart beats loudly and he is nearly blinded, as Paul was blinded on the road to Damascus when he saw Christ (Acts 9.3-9). With the eyes of his spirit he sees the dazzling light of God. And so, overtaken by a state of ecstasy, he proclaims: "Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". The glory of your kingdom, O Christ, fills all things. Have you been to a wedding, and seen when they prepare the bride for her photograph? The way her great veil fills the whole room, the way the edges of her gown cover the floor, in order to display all her glory and all her beauty? So too does the Church of Christ, at the beginning of the Liturgy, unfold herself, filling the space around her, before our very eyes.

What is this kingdom, which is blessed, glorified, honored, and superior to every other kingdom? It is the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. It is paradise, in which Christ has placed us; it is our holy Church. Its king is the God of three suns: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The servants of the king are the angels and archangels, along with the thrones, principalities, authorities, dominions, powers, the many-eyed cherubim, and the six-winged seraphim. The king's generals are the saints. Our Lady the Theotokos is the queen. The faithful soldiers of this kingdom are all those Christians who are ready to follow Christ, whatever the cost; all those who are ready to bear His honorable

name, all those who make up His Church. All of them, then—Christ, the saints, the Theotokos, the angels, the faithful of all the ages—are with us during the celebration of the Liturgy.

So when the priest says, "Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", he forgets everything: himself, his home, the world, everything he sees, and instead consecrates his heart and mind to that which unfolds before him, to the mystical, invisible things which Christ presents to him. Sensing the glory of Christ the heavenly king, the priest, with shaking knees, with a soul staggering under the burden of responsibility, and with eyes penetrating the mystery of the kingdom, says, with a trembling voice: "For all glory, honor, and worship are due to you"—to you, my Christ, who are exceedingly glorified, surrounded by saints and angels, to you is due glory, honor, and worship. Before us, then, is the whole Church. Before us Christ is present truly, really, mystically! "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them", says Christ (Mt 18.20). This is what happens during the time of the Liturgy.

What is the Liturgy? You will have noticed, on the white screen of the cinema, a small figure or an object, which initially appears in the distance, like a tiny dot on the horizon, and then it is slowly magnified and ultimately revealed in perfect clarity. That is what the Liturgy is like: little by little, before your very eyes, it reveals Christ and his kingdom.

During the celebration of the Liturgy, Christ is with us exactly as he was when he was teaching, when he made the lame leap and walk, the blind see, and the dead return to life. And this is not simply having the memory of Christ within our thoughts, but having Christ himself truly and concretely present before us. He is present—He, the teacher, the prophet, the miracle-worker. Christ who was crucified, who was raised from the dead, who ascended into heaven, is now before us! Everything that we see in church: the great hanging lamps, the clergy, the altar table, the gospel book, the bread and wine, the Little and Great Entry—all are signs of the presence of Christ.

And so, with the Divine Liturgy, we continue the work of Christ, and every time we celebrate it, it's as if we draw Christ himself close to us. This is precisely what one of the prayers says: "You are seated on high with the Father, and invisibly present here with us". You are above the heavens, and at the same time invisibly, truly, here with us. This is why the priest, when he prepares to receive Holy Communion, looks at

Christ with the eyes of his soul, and speaks to him in the second person singular: "Make us worthy, by your mighty hand, to receive your pure body and your precious blood". You, my Christ, by your mighty and undefiled hand, give me your pure body and precious blood. If we have spiritual eyes, we can see that before us stands Christ himself. And what do you do if you happen to be sitting somewhere, and all of a sudden you see someone you love? You get up and you run to them. In the same way, the Liturgy is a movement, a hastening to the beloved, an effort to seize hold of Christ, to take hold of him.

Do you remember Mary Magdalene? When she realized that she had Christ standing before her, she called him "Rabboni, which means Teacher", and sought to touch his garments, his body (Jn 20.16-17). Do you remember the woman with an issue of blood? Even though there were so many people pressing around Christ, she attempted to touch him in faith and with reverence (Lk 8.42-48). Remember Thomas? He placed his hands in Christ's wounds and cried out: "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20.27-28). This is what we do at the time of the Liturgy! And then some of us ask where Christ is! Here he is! He's standing in front of us, he's with us, next to us. "The Master is here and is calling for you" (Jn 11.28), they said to Mary, as she wept over the dead Lazarus, her brother. In the Liturgy, the Master, Christ, is present, and calls each of us by name. The eyes of those who feel this sparkle with light, and they experience the joy of Christ. Everything is filled with joy. Everything is filled with light. Everything glorifies Christ.

And so when you come to the Liturgy, you should come with the thought that you are meeting Christ, along with the desire to touch him, as St. Methodios says: "I purify myself for you, O Bridegroom, and, bearing brightly-glowing candles, I come forth to meet you"<sup>3</sup>. O Bridegroom Christ, I keep myself pure and spotless for you, and I hold bright candles in my hands to welcome you. This is how we should come to the Divine Liturgy, which is the very presence of Christ and his kingdom.

Let's go a little deeper. Why do our services have Entries? Last night at Vespers, we saw the priest making the Entry, and then enter the sanctuary. In the Divine Liturgy, at both the Little and Great Entry, the same thing happens. And thus the Liturgy is a procession towards the

<sup>3</sup> Methodios of Olympus, *Symposium* 11 (BEPES, vol. 18 [Athens, 1959], p. 86, lines 20-21).

sanctuary, a progression towards heaven. What do we do when we celebrate the procession of the saint of our city?<sup>4</sup> We carry about his icon, his relics, along with the liturgical fans and banners, and we converge in the square and sing hymns to our patron. So too is the Liturgy a procession, a progression, a journey toward heaven. To attend the Liturgy means that I have entered, not through my imagination, but truly onto the road which leads to heaven.

When there is an eclipse, the streets are filled with children and adults holding pieces of tinted glass to their eyes and looking at the sun. This is the Liturgy. It is a fixing of our eye, of our heart, on him who is enthroned in heaven. My life now revolves around Christ. For me, only one thing has value: the kingdom of heaven.

Are we, then, to abandon our family, our work, and our children in order to be constantly rushing off to Liturgy? No, my dear friends. See how great the love and wisdom of God is. All the daily events of our life can enter into the kingdom of God, and, what is more, they can serve as bridges transporting us to it. Everything can express our love for God. The love for your wife, the sacrifices you make for your children, your daily toil, your pain, your worries, your tears, your secret bitterness—all of these you must cast into the kingdom of God. In turn, God will sanctify them, render them holy for you, and give you strength to carry on for the whole week. All of these things have their place, and indeed have value, in the eyes of Christ, as long as we don't forget that our aim, our goal, and that for which our soul thirsts, is the kingdom of God. Our aim should be God himself. Our homeland should be heaven. And this is what we mean when we say "Amen": Yes, my heavenly Father, I accept all that you tell me; I have begun my journey, I have started out on the road that will lead me to heaven. I will not stop until I arrive at the place where you are.

In the Liturgy, we travel toward the kingdom of Christ, and, at the same time, we are already present within it. Christ has raised us up to heaven, or—rather—he has brought heaven down into the church. All good things, such as our salvation, holiness, a share in his humility, and in general all his gifts, Christ gives to us in the church as a "dowry"<sup>5</sup>. For

<sup>4</sup> The procession of its patron saint, St. Bessarion, takes place at the Cathedral of Trikala, on the Sunday of the Samaritan Woman.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Kavasilas, *On the Divine Liturgy* 1.2 (ed. P. Chrestou, PHNA, vol. 22 [Thessaloniki, 1979], p. 2; cf. J. M. Hussey, *Nicholas Cabasilas: A Commentary on the Divine*

us, the Liturgy is a pledge, an engagement. In the same way that one wears an engagement ring as a promise of marriage, so too my presence at the Liturgy means that I am linked with Christ, who promises me that, if I remain faithful, he will, without fail, bring me into the kingdom of heaven. Although still on earth, we live in paradise. And it is here, in the Divine Liturgy, my beloved friends, where this great truth is enacted.

Present with us when we celebrate the Liturgy is the whole of the Church of Christ. We are united with Christ and become one body with him. When you take a piece of white cloth, and place a powerful light behind it, the cloth becomes radiant and bright. In the same way, the rays of Christ penetrate us and make us christ. We become temples of Christ, members of Christ, we become christ, and he is our head. "Christ is the head of the church" (Eph 5.23), which means that he is the fountainhead, the source. When you are thirsty you go to the spring and quench your thirst. Christ is the one who refreshes our thirsty hearts. Our limbs and our flesh and our bones become the limbs and flesh and bones of Christ. We live the life of Christ, and Christ takes on our life. Just as the bread which we place in the artophorion<sup>6</sup> is one, just as the bread which we place on the altar is one, and just as Christ is one, so too when we have Christ among ourselves we become one: we become one Christ.

So what are we doing when we celebrate the Liturgy? We are having a reception, a supper. We invite as our fellow-guests the saints of our Church; we invite our father who has fallen asleep; our grandfather, our great-grandfather, our loved ones who have left us; we invite the angels. And Christ himself comes and provides his body and blood. And this is what it means when we say: "having commemorated all the saints, let us commit ourselves and one another, and all our life to Christ our God". Having welcomed all the saints into our midst, having implored them, and made them our helpers, we now give ourselves to Christ.

How is Christ rendered present in the Liturgy? Here let us pay special attention, so that when we attend the Liturgy, we can understand it better. In the celebration of the Liturgy, Christ is present along

*Liturgy* [London: SPCK, 1978], p. 25, who transposes the Greek noun "dowry" into the phrase: "God freely gives").

<sup>6</sup> The artophorion is a small liturgical vessel, placed on the altar as a container for a portion of Holy Communion, held in reserve for the sick and others who cannot participate in the Liturgy.

with the whole of the Church. The bishop is an image of Christ<sup>7</sup>. Where the bishop is, there too is the Church of Christ. This is why the bishop takes his place on the high throne, to show us that, at that moment, Christ is taking his place among us. There, where the bishop is; there, where the high priest is, Christ himself is truly present. When the disciples were gathered together in the upper room, Christ appeared to them and said, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20.19, 21, 26). And when the bishop ascends the throne, it is Christ who ascends, extending his peace to us, for he is "the offerer and the offered"<sup>8</sup>. It is Christ who, in a deeper sense, celebrates the Liturgy, and we are with him, all around him. When there is no bishop, his place is taken by his representative, who, according to the canons of the Church, must have the bishop's permission to celebrate. If he doesn't have it, there can be no Liturgy<sup>9</sup>.

The priest is clothed in white, often luxurious, gold-embroidered vestments. Why? Because he's conceited? No, my dear friends. When he wears white vestments, his aim is to show forth Christ, who at the Transfiguration appeared clothed in garments whiter than snow (cf. Mk 9.2-3). Thus Christ is manifested, not simply in the person of the priest, but even in his garments. When he wears sumptuous vestments, he wishes to manifest the glory of Christ. When he puts on the sticharion, the first of his vestments, he puts on Christ. When he puts on the epitachelion, it is as if he is receiving the grace of God. When, finally, he adds the phelonion, he becomes a complete image of Christ<sup>10</sup>.

Do you see the priest in his vestments? He is no longer this or that particular priest, but Christ. No one else in the world wears the vestments that priests wear. They are something different from, something beyond the garments of the world. It is a strange spectacle, a heavenly vision, in order to show us that something heavenly, indeed Christ himself, has come down to us<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Trallians* 3.1 (BEPES, vol. 2 [Athens, 1955], p. 272, line 14).

<sup>8</sup> Divine Liturgy, prayer of the Cherubic Hymn.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the 39th canon of the Holy Apostles (*Pedalion* [Athens, 1970], p. 43); and Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Smyrneans* 9.1 (BEPES, vol. 2 [Athens, 1955], p. 281, lines 29-30).

<sup>10</sup> The vestments mentioned here are roughly equivalent to the alb, stole, and chasuble.

<sup>11</sup> See the *Life of the Hieromartyr Pankratios of Tauromenia* (Great Synaxaristes, vol. 7 [Athens, 1976], pp. 157-58).



Then the Royal Doors open and the priest appears in the sanctuary. Why, though, doesn't he look at us, but looks instead toward the sanctuary? When the priest stands in front of the altar, he is praying, and imploring, and calling upon Christ as our intercessor. And, afterwards, when the priest makes the Entry, he will again pass through our midst without so much as glancing in our direction. It is he who goes ahead of us, who ascends, who leads us on the road to heaven.

What is the significance of this behavior? Why does the priest always go in front of us without looking at us? Pay attention to this in order to understand. Have you ever been up to the monasteries of Meteora? Have you gone, for instance, to the Monastery of the Great Meteoron? In the old days, people had to be pulled up there in a net. The gate-keepers would put them in it, close their eyes so they wouldn't get dizzy, and the monks would haul them up with a winch. Later on, they built a little path, extremely narrow, and wedged tightly up against the rock, which ran in the direction of the Metamorphosis mountain. So when a visitor came, how did he manage to climb up this very narrow pathway? If he looked down, over the edge of the precipice, he would surely have collapsed and been lost. But in those days a monk used to come down, and he would offer the visitor his cassock to hold and say to him: "As I climb up and look upwards, you hold on to me. We'll go up together. But don't look down. If you look down, you'll fall, and you'll pull me down as well". And so the monk would take him up that narrow, little path, with the visitor's heart pounding, because he knew that below was the abyss. He took him up, circling round and round, and when they arrived at the summit, he would say: "Ah! Here is Christ!" This is precisely what the priest does. He takes us up the narrow pathway. Be careful. Don't look down, lest something earthly should lead you astray. Keep your heart on high, your mind like an eagle, so that it can cut through the clouds and fly up into the heavens! Land animals can't fly. So be an eagle! Look up!

In the meantime, the chanters sing the antiphons: "By the intercessions of the Theotokos, Savior, save us". They sing them in combination with various verses from the Psalter, which are prophecies of the coming of Christ. They foretell Christ's presence among us. Then the priest makes the Little Entry, enraptured, because in reality he has entered like Moses into the cloud which conceals Christ. Let's recall what Moses experienced when he ascended Mt. Sinai. What thunder! What earthquakes, fire, and smoke! Such fear and trembling! God was present! (Ex 19.16, 18).

God is likewise present to the priest. There are, of course, no earthquakes here, so as not to frighten us away. Neither is there any smoke, save for that of the censer with its fragrance. The priest knows that Christ precedes him in the Entry, and being unable to contain himself, his heart cries out: "You are holy, our God, and to you we ascribe glory". You are holy, set apart, my God. The priest looks at the sanctuary and is certain that God, the Spirit, and the angels are there.

In the course of the Little Entry, the priest processes through the church until he reaches the customary place. There he asks Christ that, with his own entry, there should be an entry of the holy angels and archangels. Then he says: "Blessed is the entry of your holy ones". He blesses the entry at which, along with the priest, myriads of angels and clouds of saints enter into the sacred space of the church. Together with them, treading on noetic clouds, the priest enters into the sanctuary. And fearful of being consumed by the fire of God, he says: "You are holy, O God", but I am a sinner, therefore do not burn me.

I had the good fortune to know a holy man who often, when he had celebrated the Liturgy, emerged from the sanctuary with an otherworldly look; with an eye which saw beyond the horizon. He used to celebrate the Liturgy alone, with the help of a young monk, to whom he used to say: "Go outside, go out, go out immediately". He would close the door and remain alone in the sanctuary, sometimes for an hour or two. Later, with his spirit bathed in the light of God, and with his eyes flashing with divine brightness, he would come to the door and open it. "Come", he would say to his disciple, "come and see: here was the Holy Spirit, there the Seraphim, there the cherubim", and he would tremble all over, but with a trembling which was full of joy and happiness<sup>12</sup>.

And we know that St. Spyridon "had angels concelebrating with him"<sup>13</sup>, and indeed every priest concelebrates with the angels and the saints. And the people, because they know this, sing the angelic hymn: "Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal". The angels in heaven sing: "Holy, Holy, Holy" (cf. Isa 6.3), and we thus repeat their words. In this way, heaven and earth, angels and human beings, all of us together, form one choir, one festival, one song. For our part, we add: "Have

<sup>12</sup> See C. Philoathonites, *Papa Tychon* (Athens: Semantron, 1981), 23-24.

<sup>13</sup> Dismissal Hymn of St. Spyridon.

mercy on us". It is the cry of sinful man, because the angels are holy and all-holy. Nevertheless, unworthy sinners conduct the Great Entry in the company of angels! Christ makes his entrance, together with his saints, his angels, and along with them go I, the sinful priest.

This is why Orthodox kings long ago followed the priest in procession when the Great Entry took place: they served as a kind of honor guard for the heavenly king who at that time was passing through the church. There is a tradition that one such king, during a moment of ecstasy, felt a shudder at the presence of Christ and his angels, and fell down fainting in his royal robes and crown.

After the Trisagion Hymn and the reading of the Epistle, as the priest is about to read the Gospel, he turns to the people, for the first time, and blesses them saying: "Peace be with you all". However, it isn't the priest who is giving the blessing at that moment, but rather Christ himself. As Christ was about to ascend into heaven, he raised his hands and blessed his disciples, and they worshipped him and went away (Lk 24.50-52). This is exactly what happens at that moment. The priest, the intermediary, the sinner, withdraws and leaves Christ himself to celebrate the Liturgy!

And this is why, at the Little Entry, the priest holds the Gospels in front of his face—not to hide his face—but for it to be clear that it is no longer he who is there, but only Christ. And when he holds it up, we sing: "Come, let us worship and fall down before Christ". We worship Christ, not a Gospel book, not the priest. Christ stands before us, teaching us. It is Christ who is the celebrant, Christ who speaks, Christ who is concealed in the priest. Before this, the priest says: "Wisdom, stand upright". What does this "upright" mean? It means that "we are meant to encounter God and the mysteries with anxious expectation, and not listlessly, but to enter into such communion with faithful zeal"<sup>14</sup>. With anxious expectation, with longing, with attention, and thus "upright" must we wait to see Christ and communicate with him. And this is also why we worship him.

When Christ passes through the church during the Great Entry, the priest says: "May the Lord our God remember all of us in his kingdom". In response, each of us should say: "Lord, remember me in your kingdom" (Lk 23.42). We see Christ with the eyes of the soul, and we ask him to remember us. It is the Lord who is the celebrant. It is he who

passes among us. It is the Lord who comes to take our gifts, to place them on the altar.

As gifts we offer bread and wine. Bread sustains and gives life to man, while wine gives him strength and health. And so when we give Christ the bread and the wine, we give him those things which nourish us, which give us life<sup>15</sup>. Mystically, symbolically, we offer to Christ our life, our health, our joy; we offer ourselves, we offer our difficulties, our pains, our longings, our children. We offer everything that is ours along with the whole world. This offering is made as the "prayer of offering" (*αναφορά*) is said. The word *αναφορά* comes from the verb *αναπηρεο*, which means "I carry up". At this awesome moment, Christ receives our gifts, our life which we offer to him, and he places them upon the heavenly altar. He receives us.

When we go the Liturgy, we go to partake of Christ. But before we can partake, we must be ready to give him what he asks of us, to give him ourselves. If we hold things back, we can't be united with Christ. At that moment, Christ appears to us as a slaughtered, sacrificial victim, and we must likewise feel ourselves slaughtered for his sake; and we must be ready, if necessary, to die for him.

Throughout the Liturgy, Christ is continuously presented to us, and thus we sing "alleluia". At the Little Entry, after the reading of the Epistle, and again at the Great Entry, we sing alleluia. What does "alleluia" mean? It is a greeting which is exchanged at the marriages of Christ. We have special wishes and greetings for marriages. "My you live happily ever after for a thousand years", is a wish we often extend to newly-weds. "Alleluia" is also a wedding hymn, a greeting at the marriages of Christ, when Christ marries his bride, the soul. The Liturgy, with its theophanies of God, and with the continuous presence of Christ, is the contracting of a mystical marriage with the Lord. "Joy" is another word we use for marriage. In the Liturgy, it is as if Christ is saying to us: "Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Mt 25.23), that is, "into the marriages of your Lord".

And if you don't want to? If you don't want to, where then will you go to hide from him? Wherever you go, into the depths of the sea, or to the heights of the heavens, you will encounter his presence (cf. Ps

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Kavalas, *On the Divine Liturgy* 22.5 (Chrestou, p. 120; cf. Hussey, p. 61).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3.1.1 (Chrestou, p. 48, 50; Hussey, p. 31-32).

138.7-10). Somewhere he will overtake you, and make you his own. But wouldn't it be better to surrender of your own accord? You will see then how great your joy will be! If you refuse, this will be for you a kind of suicide.

After he has given Holy Communion to the people, the priest elevates the chalice, and says: "Always, now, and for ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen". In so doing, he reminds us of the Ascension of Christ, for this is the moment when Christ promises us that he "will be with us always" (Mt 28.20). Having received the Holy Spirit, having beheld the secrets of the kingdom, we can leave with the eyes of our soul brimming with the beauty that we have seen.

And so, my dear friends, our Liturgy is a pledge made by Christ, a marriage. Through the liturgy, he places us in his kingdom. Afterwards, however, we shall depart from the church, and we shall return home with our passions, our sins, and our unhappiness. But don't worry. We shall go to the Liturgy again, we shall seize hold of Christ again. He will divinize us again. And so with constant striving, with constant progress—the priest in front, ourselves behind—we shall reach the kingdom of heaven. Do we go to the Liturgy with this desire? If so, we have secured the kingdom of heaven.

We have seen the heavens open in the Liturgy. We have seen the good things of the kingdom of heaven. We have received our dowry, the Holy Spirit. We have learnt that he whom we seek can be ours to embrace, that our sinful souls can take hold of him in church. Each time we come, let it be in order to take hold of Christ, and pull him mystically and invisibly within ourselves. And when we leave, let it be with souls rejoicing, and let us "entrust our souls, and deliver our life to him". Let us entrust our souls to Christ, whom we have seen, and let us dedicate our life to him, and "let us set our hearts ablaze with the fire of his love"<sup>16</sup>. Let us set our heart on fire with the flame of his love, with a fire which burns up within us everything that is rotten, and which will cleanse us in preparation for eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1.12 (Chrestou, 42; Hussey, 29).

## OUR CHURCH ATTENDANCE: REFLECTIONS ON THE DIVINE LITURGY OF ST. JAMES\*

Throughout these two days that I have lived together with you, I have realized and sensed how much devotion your hearts have, how much you love God, how, even in the most difficult moments of your life, you seek a sign from him, an opportunity for repentance and confession. As I now prepare to leave, I would like to say a few words with respect to the saint whose feast we celebrate today.

St. James, the martyr, is one of the most important personalities of the early Church. As the Lord's Brother, St. James was not merely related to Christ according to the flesh, but also deeply absorbed his spirit. His righteousness was so great that he received the epithet "the Just" as the distinguishing mark of his whole life.

According to the tradition of the Church, it was he who composed the first liturgy, the first text, from which all the other divine liturgies eventually emerged. We're not in a position to know exactly how the liturgy evolved, but this tradition alone indicates that the saint we commemorate today loved the worship of the Church, and was ardently devoted to the Divine Liturgy. It was he who established some of the basic forms of church life in the heart of the Apostolic Church of Jerusalem. The liturgical traditions associated with his name soon spread to the other churches.

The Divine Liturgy is truly a gift of the Holy Spirit to humanity. It is an initiation into the mysteries of the Spirit, a mode of the revelation of God and of all things heavenly. There is nothing in the Liturgy which is not revelatory of the Godhead and of the energies of the Holy Trinity.

\* A Sermon delivered in the church of Our Lady Katholike, Limassol, Cyprus, on Sunday, October 23rd, 1988.

Because we know and believe that God is our Father, we view the church, especially when we celebrate the Liturgy, as our true home. We come in and go out freely, we are happy to be here, we make the sign of the cross, we light our candles, we speak with our friends, and it is easy to see that the Orthodox feel that the church is their home. And the church is our home. Our true family is the gathering (*synaxis*) of the church. Our family is not simply our children and relatives, however many we have. It is rather all of us, all humanity, including all those who have turned aside to the left or to the right, or who have perhaps not yet even thought about God, or dared to admit that their heart is filled with cries and groans, and that, with these, they hope to open heaven, or that God will answer them, but they hesitate and are ashamed. The Liturgy is our family, our gathering, our house. And what a spacious house it is! Together with us are those who are absent, along with sinners, and the wicked, and the dead, indeed, even those who are in hell, but who may yet remember something about God. And who knows how many of these will find relief, be drawn out of Hades, and even dragged up from the depths of hell, thanks to the prayers of the Church, her memorial services, and divine liturgies!<sup>1</sup> This is our home. We believers have such a large house!

So we come to church, to our true home, and we are truly glad. This is the greatest privilege which a Christian can have. Here we experience the grace of God. We experience our salvation, the results of the redemptive work of our God, of Christ, the great "High Priest" (Heb 2.17; 5.9-10; 7.24-27). Here, in church, we acquire a sense of the Apostle's words: "Christ, through his own blood, entered once for all into the Holy Place ... thus securing eternal redemption" (Heb 9.12). Christ lives for us, he prays for us, and raises his hands to the heavenly Father. He shed his blood for us only once. He entered into the Holy of Holies only once, and, from that day, he has not ceased to urge the saints—and particularly His Mother, Our Lady—to intercede for us to the heavenly Father, for our hearts, for our sins, for our pains, for the disappointments of our life. Once and for all he entered into heaven, where he remains eternally, never again to leave the throne where he took his

<sup>1</sup> Synaxarion of the Matins of the Sunday of Orthodoxy; cf. Gregory of Rome, cited in *Evergetinos*, vol. 4 (Athens, 1966), qu. 30.1, 11.-14, p. 499.

place "at the right hand of the heavenly Father" (cf. Mk 16.19; Heb 10.12; 12.2). This means that coming to church to attend the Divine Liturgy is not a random act or chance occurrence. It isn't something about which you can say: Don't worry, it doesn't matter, I'll come tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow. No. It's a unique act. We go to him whom we have loved, to him who gave his life for us, to Christ.

But where is Christ? Here and everywhere! Above all, Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity, is seated within the Holy of Holies, at the right hand of the heavenly Father. So don't think that when we go to church, we are simply entering and exiting an ordinary building. Instead, we go up to, and make our entrance into, the Holy of Holies, into the heavens themselves. As we open the curtain of the Royal Doors, and Christ is present in the Holy Chalice, so too do we sinners open the doors of heaven and enter! Although we are sinners, when we enter into the Liturgy, we go up to the heavenly Jerusalem. It is then that you will realize what greatness our souls can experience! We sit down at the right hand of the Father, receiving honor from the honor of Christ, and taking the most honorable flesh of our Lord and God<sup>2</sup>.

When we enter church, then, we are traversing the distance from earth to heaven. We pass beyond the stars, we leave the angels below us, and we rise up to the heights of the Holy Trinity. This is the mystery of our Church. We see the bread and wine, but who among us does not believe that they are Christ? We inhale the fragrance of wine and bread, but who among us does not believe this to be the body and blood of the Savior?

The same mystery is enacted here, outside the space of the sanctuary. In front of us we see various images, above us are the lamps, each hanging next to the other. But that's wrong. These too are part of the mystery. We are not here. We are up there, together with the assemblies of the saints, together with the ranks of the angels, with the six-winged seraphim—whose swift movements teach us to hasten day and night to Christ—together with the cherubim of many eyes, so that our own eyes can become accustomed to seeing Christ. This is a sacrament. This is what a "mystery" of the Church means.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Eph 2.6; Chrysostom, *Interpretation of Ps. 44 10* (PG 55.199); John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 3.6 (50) (PG 94.1008A).



In order to understand this better, let's imagine for a moment that we want to go on a journey, in order to climb the highest mountain. What do we do then? We take with us supplies—food, water, proper shoes, walking sticks, and whatever else we need for the trip—we consider the state of our health and get ready to go. And as these ongoing preparations continue, suddenly we realize that we've arrived at the summit. Something like that happens in the spiritual life, too. For example, while we're preparing our hearts to go to heaven one day, we have, in reality, already attained the heavenly heights the very moment we decided to enter the church. Preparing to wage war with the devil and with sin, we find that, even though sin is still a force in our flesh—in our soul, in our heart—when we enter the church, that same flesh is seated at the right hand of the Father. This is a mystery which is revealed many times in church.

What were we doing a moment ago, my dear friends, when the Little Entry took place? Just before that Entry, we offered a prayer to God, and asked the Lord to make us worthy to accompany the Holy Gospel together with the angels: "Master, Lord ... grant that with our entry there may be an entry of the holy angels". And this is in fact what happens. We do not make this entry. It is made by the angels, sent by God. And this is why the angels are called "ministering spirits" (cf. Ps 103.4; Heb 1.14), because they come to minister to us, to serve us, just as the sacristans do who hold the candlesticks, or light the censer. This is the work of the angels. They prepare everything for us, so that, one day, the table of salvation will be ready. And when will it be ready? In our homes, the table is sometimes set quickly, sometimes more slowly. And this is just what Christ does, the Lord of heaven and earth: sometimes he works swiftly, sometimes slowly, preparing the table of salvation as he knows best. He and his angels serve us. The angels appear first, clearing the way, after which we take the censer and cense them in thanksgiving for their service, and then we cense the saints, and everyone and everything else in the church.

When St. Spyridon was celebrating the Liturgy, and said, "Peace be with you", the angels themselves responded and said, "And with your spirit"<sup>3</sup>. The Fathers of the Church always experienced such revelations

<sup>3</sup> Synaxarion of the Matins of St. Spyridon.

and visions, which continue to occur up to the present day. St. Sergius of Radonezh always had an angel who stood next to him throughout the Divine Liturgy. One day, when he was celebrating the Liturgy, his two disciples noticed that there were not three of them present, but four. They looked. They were bewildered. Who was the fourth? This was the first time they'd seen him, and they said: "Are there four of us? How can this be?" "Shhh!" the saint replied, "I'll explain later. It is the holy angel whom God has sent me. He comes every time and assists me"<sup>4</sup>.

This is our greatness. This is what St. James reveals in his liturgy. And this is why he begins his liturgy with the Little Entry. The moment he entered the place where the church had congregated, he would say: "Peace be with you all". That was the Little Entry. Later, when the Great Entry is about to take place, the priest turns his eyes to heaven, and calls the things of heaven down to earth. He commands the cherubim, the seraphim, even the Holy Trinity, because God gives the priest the power to have rights over Jesus Christ. Because he is not visibly present, Christ delegates his work to his priests. And when the priest is in the sanctuary, he is beyond every earthly ruler, for he does not govern men, but rather the choirs of saints and the armies of angels. We at times may be fatigued and stressed, but the saints and the angels never say "No" to the priest of God, particularly during the Liturgy.

And so, my dear friends, this is the greatness which St. James reveals to us today. Our Liturgy is an exceedingly great gift. No one is worthy of such greatness. No one can do anything without God. He alone makes these magnificent blessings real, and places them in our hands and hearts.

We command the saints, and the saints come. Whom do you love? That is the one who visits you. Whom have you called? That is the one who will come to you. And for this we say: We thank you, Lord our God, because you have brought down the ranks of angels and raised us up to heaven. We are found worthy to stand before the heavenly Father. What blessedness! What happiness!

But let each of us ponder how great and how rich God has made us; how highly he has exalted us, despite the fact that we are sinners! "Woe is me, for I am lost!" (Isa 6.5). Woe is me, said Isaiah the prophet,

<sup>4</sup> *Life of St. Sergius of Radonezh* (Oropos-Attica, 1991), 61-63.



for God himself has descended upon me, and I am afraid I will die. And this is what we should also say when we come into church. We should be afraid, but we should also rejoice. We should tremble, but our hearts should also leap for joy, because we are embracing God, and God is embracing us.

So we have come to church, to the Liturgy! Let nothing disturb the tranquility of your soul. God is present. Wherever we look, God is before us! If we don't see him, this doesn't mean he isn't there, but only that our eyes are not used to seeing him. At the end of the Divine Liturgy, we proclaim: "We have seen the true light". Our hearts have seen it. We have felt it deep within our life.

When the Theotokos was taken up to heaven, the angels cried out: "Lift up your gates, you princes, commanders of heaven, angels and archangels; open the gates of heaven for the queen to enter" (cf. Ps 23.7)<sup>5</sup>. Concerning Christ, however, we should all the more cry out to the angels and the saints, who love us and protect us: "Lift up the gates, and the king of glory will enter in" (Ps 23.7)<sup>6</sup>.

With the eye of our mind, let us see the king for whom we sinners opened the way, and let us say with the Psalmist: "Come, let us worship and fall down before him and cry to the Lord ... for he is our God" (Ps 94.6-7). Let us open the depths of our heart to the Lord, who is present here with us, and let us advance more each and every day, so that we will be able to discover everything that God, our redeemer, has done for us.

<sup>5</sup> Vespers of the Dormition, Doxastikon of the Kekragaria.

<sup>6</sup> Vespers of the Ascension.

## OUR RELATIONS WITH OUR NEIGHBOR: MONASTIC LIFE AS A MODEL FOR SOCIETY\*

It could be said that our subject today—"our relations with our neighbor"—is a practical one, but it is nevertheless of the greatest importance for our daily life. Whatever exists in the world is an icon which elevates our thoughts, our minds, and our hearts to heaven and joins us to God. Our subject today, however, does not consist simply of a single icon, but constitutes an entire icon-screen, showing us how the saints lived, and how they in turn want us to live. And I have chosen this subject because today we celebrate the memory of a great saint, St. James, the Lord's Brother, who will provide us with a model for how to live our life in a manner pleasing to God.

St. James, as you know, was the son of Joseph, and thus the brother of Christ. He was such an exceptional person, so righteous, and so holy, that some of the Jews felt diminished in his presence, and others simply envied him, for there was no one else among them like James. And so, when he condemned them for refusing to accept Christ as the Messiah, they dragged him to the highest point of the Temple in Jerusalem (cf. Lk 4.9), and threw him down—but he didn't die. Despite this miracle, however, they refused to repent, and the more wicked among them rushed forward and put the saint to death<sup>1</sup>.

For us, it is important, not only that James was a man of great faith and virtue, adorned with the glory of martyrdom, but that he was also a man of great nobility. We could say that he was in fact a model of social nobility, an example of how we should live with, and relate to those around us; of how we are to direct others, and how we are to submit to them. At the same time, James was a model of how to be loved by others,

\* An Address given in Larnaca, Cyprus, 23 October, 1988.

<sup>1</sup> Synaxarion for 23 October.

how to be a living icon, a tabernacle, a home, a heart, a love. Because he had such delicacy, because he was so noble, so gentle, there wasn't a single person in the Church of Jerusalem who didn't love him and trust him. And this is how God wants us to be in our everyday life, so that others love us and feel grateful toward us; so that they can communicate openly with us, share with us their happiness, their sorrows, their problems. So that they feel that we are people whose hearts are connected, whose hearts keep close to one another, and help one another.

Though there were many problems in the Apostolic Age, no one had any quarrels with St. James. On the contrary, even those who were divided—for division is a worm which gets in everywhere, it even got into paradise—those who were divided, I say, were united again thanks to the noble conduct of James. You will remember that, in human eyes, the early Church at one point appeared in danger of breaking up, along with the work of Christ, the Savior. But such a catastrophe was averted because God found the right people, and the new life in Christ, brought about by the crucifixion and resurrection, continued to flourish. As you know, there was, at that time, a dispute between Christians of Jewish origin, and those who had been Hellenists. They couldn't live together. The influence of the Jewish law on the former, and of Greek culture on the latter, created serious problems in communication and coexistence. Who brought them together? St. James, who, in the end, succeeded in convening the Apostolic Council, at which he presided (Acts 15.1-22). No other apostle could have presided, only James, because he knew how to bring balance to men's hearts, to understand their spirits, and to help the faithful, without for a moment sacrificing anything essential.

He even reconciled Peter with Paul, whose own relations had reached a point of crisis. The Apostle Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem. But he hesitated, because he was afraid that they wouldn't accept him there. Some went so far as to regard him as a gentile because he didn't observe the precepts of the Law. Their hearts were full of suspicions about him. Peter, on the other hand, whose character we know from the facts of his life, was an impulsive man, and he strongly criticized the Apostle Paul, who had previously reproved him at Antioch for his adherence to Jewish laws. But St. James reconciled them (Acts 15.6-21; Gal 2.11-21).

St. James was very poor, one of the poorest men of his times. He didn't wear fine clothing, but a simple white tunic, and went about

barefoot. He was also an athlete, an accomplished athlete—first in the event of bending the knee. From all his many prostrations before God, his knees had become like those of a camel, covered in calluses. Day and night he devoted himself to ceaseless labors: by day for the hearts of men, and by night before God<sup>2</sup>.

St. James, then, provides us with the basic principles of gentleness and nobility, and with the basic forms of social coexistence and communion, which we encounter chiefly in that most highly organized and most ancient of societies: the monastic way of life.

Monasticism is a true society, a true communion of persons, a liturgical gathering (*συναχίς*). In the monastery, monks are not isolated individuals or mere names, but together they constitute one heart, one body. We do not exist separately from one another. And since monasteries, for the most part, have more monks than they do cells, everyone is close to everybody else, and expresses the love of his heart. What one finds in the organization of monastic life is an example of life in heaven. And the Church takes that example and offers it to the faithful, in the same way that the Fathers did.

The world thinks that when someone becomes a monk in a monastery, he leaves society and becomes wild. They say this because they are unaware that monks are the most sociable of human beings. You should know that no one can become a monk if he is not sociable, that is, if he cannot communicate and deal openly and directly with all the difficulties encountered in a life shared with others. If a man has had difficulties in marrying or establishing a family, chances are he won't be a good monk. He must feel secure in his life. Monasteries are not places of refuge. Consequently, a monk is someone who may have formerly attained success in such relationships, and loved them, too, and thus he doesn't reject them, he doesn't condemn them, he doesn't despise them, but rather prefers something superior for himself.

A monastery is a warm, close-knit brotherhood. All are members of one body, the body of Christ. There one feels what the Apostle Paul says to the members of the church of Corinth, who were divided: "If one member suffers", such as my left hand, "all the members suffer to-

<sup>2</sup> See the discourse: *On Saint James, the Apostle and Brother of our Lord* (PG 115.201AB); and St. Nikodemos Hagiorites, *Commentary on the Epistle of James* (Thessaloniki, 1986), 33.

gether with it"—and thus my eye will look down to see what is wrong with my hand, and my right hand will seek to help it. All the members help one another. If one member suffers, the others are sorry for it and help it. If one member rejoices, if it is covered in glory, all the members rejoice; our whole body rejoices (cf. 1 Cor 12.26-27).

Let's take a closer look now at some of the social conditions in a monastery, beginning with property, concerning which from time to time there are great debates. How many laws have been promulgated, and how many court cases have been tried because of property! But in the monastery, there is no property. It is not permitted for a monk to say, even about the point of a pencil, that it is "mine". The notions of "mine" and "yours" do not exist in the monastic life. People love monasteries, and in their love they sometimes make a mistake and give gifts to the monks, but nobody keeps anything. They give them all to the Elder, or tell the visitor that gifts need to be given and distributed through the Elder. There is nothing that is mine or yours. The very concept has been cast out, eliminated. And with it has been exiled the root cause of great quarrels and contentions<sup>3</sup>. Let's turn now to another issue, namely, work.

What is work like in a monastery? In the world, you finish high school, and, in order to enroll in a university or enter the world of work, you have to compete with hundreds of candidates. The process is not an easy one: you grow tired, you fall ill, you take medicines, you rest, you get tired again, and you worry constantly. Until you actually enter a profession and have your own job, what an ordeal it is! If, that is, you're fortunate enough to find work in an area of your own choosing, and if your work is fulfilling.

In a monastery, however, such worries don't exist, because ambition for careers doesn't exist. Nobody says, "I want this particular task". But each monk is free to express his opinion, to speak with the abbot about the particular task to which he has been assigned, because a monastery is not a prison. It is a free world, and everybody contributes to it what he wishes, what his own heart desires to offer. And so the monk can express his thoughts as a free man, but no one is free if he is unable to subdue his opinion and control his will. Thus the monastery lacks the kind of self-interested desires which create unhappiness in our life.

<sup>3</sup> John Chrysostom, *On Genesis*, Homily 33.3 (PG 53.309).

Furthermore, skills are not the primary criterion. In the world, an intelligent person attends the university, and one who is not intelligent is left out, and has to struggle to live. In a monastery, whether you're intelligent, wise, unwise, educated, trained, good, bad, weak, sick—whatever you are is not taken into account. What is chiefly taken into account, however, are the spiritual interests of the monk. The monastery tries to see what is in the best interests of his soul, which has come to Christ in order to gain paradise and eternity. One sort of task might help him, another might not. What happens then? Without his knowing it, he will be assigned precisely that task which will help him the most.

Also taken into account are the interests of the brotherhood. You'll have noticed that I use the word "task" (*diakonema*) and not "occupation", because in the monastery I serve (*diakono*) my brother through my work, I become his servant, I take up the occupation of Jesus Christ, who "came not to be served, but to serve" (Mt 20.28). A monk is possessed by the desire to serve others. Thus the second criterion is service in the interests of the brotherhood.

No less important is the peace of the members. Let's suppose that there's a teacher who's at odds with the principal. What arguments can ensue, what insults, what sins, lies, and court cases! In the monastery, however, when we see that two people do not get along with each other, because they may be weak, if we haven't succeeded in making them strong—and it's natural that not everyone is strong—then, when the time comes to assign them new tasks, they will not be placed together. Everything is settled peacefully.

You will see that responsibility in these matters does not rest with the individual monk. He remains calm, relieved of every care and concern. He practices obedience, a virtue with which he serves the body of the brotherhood and builds up his own soul. His heart is joyous and free so that he can pray.

We have spoken about the ownership of property and work. Let's say a word about justice. Today some people say that we don't need love, we need justice. But we say that we'll find justice up in heaven; here we need love. And because we know that justice depends on true love, it is justice which guides us, and gives the scepter to love.

Love is a gift of Christ to his body (cf. Eph 5.25), and, in this particular case, to the brotherhood. Indeed, no monastic brotherhood can

live without love. Monks live because they love. Love is the imitation of Christ, because "he loved us first" (1 Jn 4.19). Thus when I love, it means that I have received a gift, I have received a favor from God, and in this I imitate Christ.

The aim of love is for one person to give joy to another; for me to voluntarily deprive myself of something so that someone else has more; for me to sacrifice myself so that the other feels at ease, feels secure in his life. Love is a link which ties us to the Church and at the same time to Christ. How are we to achieve this? By "bearing patiently with one another's failings in the spirit of love", as the Apostle Paul says (cf. Eph 4.2), by accepting the other person as he is. Does he grumble? Let him grumble! If you try to make him stop grumbling, he'll grumble even more, and you'll get upset and start to shout. Someone else gets up in the middle of the night, makes a lot of noise, and wakes you up. You probably do the same thing and don't even realize it. Leave him alone, because if you try to reprove him, he'll want later to correct your mistakes. Only the abbot corrects people in a monastery, never a monk, unless he is under the influence of a demon, in which case he will comment, critique, advise, and tell others "do this" and "do that". But the true monk never behaves in this way. In a monastery there is one father, and all the others are brothers. You can see with what tenderness our Church has seen to these things. And thus there are no fits of anger, or shouting based on disagreements; no malice, no revenge, and everybody is kind. And what does "kind" mean? It is the mark of one whose absence does not pass unnoticed because he is merciful and compassionate. How do we become kind? By "forgiving one another" (Eph 4.32). I realize, for instance, that someone is angry with me. I don't speak roughly to him. Instead, I behave toward him with great politeness and love, imitating the Lord.

We also express our love by honoring one another. For example, we never sit down opposite someone older, unless he tells us to, or we have his permission. If someone has failed in something, makes a mistake, or has a problem, we will show him great love, in order to restore a sense of balance and relieve him of his difficulties, thus "looking to each other's interests", as the Apostle Paul says to the Philippians (Phil 2.4). Let each of us do what the other wants. The husband what his wife wants, and the wife what the husband wants.

Do you see, my brothers and sisters, how much delicacy of feeling there is in the Church, and particularly among the saints? The saints are always careful in their dealings with others. Why? Because they have tasted the sweetness and peace of the Holy Spirit, and they know that, if they are not careful in their relations with their neighbors, they will lose the gifts of the Spirit. The saints try never to sadden anybody, not even the animals. They see the other person as if he were Christ<sup>4</sup>. And the other person really is Christ, because he is an image of God. And thus the saints love all men, for all men are images of God, and in this way Christ and humanity become one in the hearts of the saints, in the inner depths of their being.

When someone shows you the love of God, kindness, and delicacy of feeling, this is communion with God. Do you want to partake of the body and blood of Christ? Receive Holy Communion. But don't forget that there are other means of communion, too. Among the Monastic Rules of St. Antony the Great is the following: "Never create difficulties for someone else; never attempt to insist on what you say"<sup>5</sup>. You have said something, for instance, to which the other replies, "No. It isn't as you say". In response, don't try to prove that you are right, but instead find a polite way of letting him know that he has won the argument. Because if he doesn't feel that he is the victor, he may be overcome by bitterness, obstinacy, poison, feelings of revenge and inferiority, and much else besides. Gently yield to him without showing it, without his realizing it, so that he thinks he's convinced you. You, of course, will remain steadfast in the truth. If we don't behave like this, evil will rule us, as the rule of St. Antony goes on to say.

St. Athanasios the Great, who knew St. Antony, tells us that, even though Antony was an old man, he fasted every day. As we know, Antony lived a harsh life, wrestling daily with demons, and often going six months without seeing another human being. When, however, he would return to the world of men, he was "gracious and politic", which means he was "diplomatic", in the good sense of that word. We don't tell the truth straight out. The other person can't bear this. A husband, for example, returns from work, and finds that his wife has done some-

<sup>4</sup> *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Abba Apollon) (PG 65.136B).

<sup>5</sup> Cited in D.A. Petrakos, *The Institution of Monasticism in the Eastern Orthodox Church* (Leipzig, 1907), p. 41.

adds: "Be approachable in your dealings", that is, when you are holding a conversation, let your face be filled with joy, a smile. Be "gentle in your speech", which means that when you speak, sweetness should flow from your mouth, and honey from your lips. Never speak harshly or cruelly, "never roughly, even if reproof is due"<sup>9</sup>. And if it is necessary to point something out to another, to correct him—because you are a teacher, a professor, a spiritual father, a father or mother—correct him with great gentleness, because if he is wounded, he will close his heart and he will become worse.

Another rule for monks, this one from St. Theodore the Studite, says the following: "If you condemn someone, or malign that person, you will be punished with four months of fasting"<sup>10</sup>. And what does "fasting" mean here? To eat nothing but a little bread and water. Do you see how much he honors the human person? And another rule says: "A slanderer shall not take Communion for forty days"<sup>11</sup>. And this was at a time when monks took Communion every day. So if you commune only four times a year, this means excommunication for ten years. Worse than slander is the desire for revenge. You wrong me in some way and I don't forget it. Two years later, you come to ask me for something, and I say to you: "Remember when I asked you for something and you didn't give it to me?" Concerning such behavior, St. Neophytos the Solitary said to his monks: "If you take revenge, the penalty is excommunication for the rest of your life"<sup>12</sup>. Here excommunication means excluding the monk from the brotherhood, so that he eats separately, and doesn't have contact with the others. A very heavy punishment!

St. Basil the Great, in his rulings for nuns, has this to say: "She who gestures wickedly with her eyes in order to cause her neighbor sorrow, shall be excommunicated for one week"<sup>13</sup>. Those who make hurtful signs even with their eyes are excommunicated for a week. Do you see the nobility of the great Fathers of the Church?

Let's say a word about visits which monks sometimes make to homes, or to the dwellings of other monks. Note these few simple things. St. Nei-

los, who was a great ascetic and theologian, says that when you meet someone or go to a house, "do not expect to be greeted first", that is, don't expect the other person to say "Good day" to you. Instead, he counsels, "let us greet him first, whether he is a friend or an enemy"<sup>14</sup>. Whether he is a friend, or whether he is an enemy, we will behave in exactly the same way.

Another ascetic, Abba Isaiah, says: "If you are invited as a guest to someone's house"—that is, if you go to the house of a man or woman acquaintance—"and he or she goes out and leaves you alone"—and your host needs to leave you alone—don't raise your eyes and begin to examine the things around you with curiosity. Don't open the drawer to see what's in there, not even a "window, or a container, or a book"—because your host may have a letter of his in between its pages. He may keep something in the container he doesn't want you to see. "Speak to him as he departs", advises the saint, and, so that your host will be untroubled in his mind, say to him: "Please, have you something to give me to do until you return?"<sup>15</sup> In this way, he doesn't feel that you've been left alone, and you feel that he's still there.

St. Neilos, whom I mentioned a moment ago, also says that, when you're with others, you should be serious, well groomed, properly attired, and charming, so that you will be dignified and respected. Your walk should be manly, even if you're a woman. You should place limits on yourself when eating. When you're with someone and he gives you something to eat, he will of course set before you the best food he has. But don't eat greedily, because you'll create a bad impression. Don't insult your self, either. And if you're still hungry, control yourself: eat a little of everything, and that's enough. Of course, if you're used to eating a lot, it will be hard to eat less, and thus you must be practiced at eating only a little in order to control yourself properly.

"Moderation in sleeping" is another rule. If you're a guest somewhere, don't be the first to go off to bed and leave the rest of those in the house not knowing what to do. Sleep less than you do at home, because you should be company for the people who are providing you with hospitality, you should converse with them, show them your love, give them the gifts you have brought them, and with these demonstrate

<sup>9</sup> St. Basil the Great, *Letter* 2.5 (PG 32.229C-232A).

<sup>10</sup> *Canons and Rule* 3 (PG 99.1724A).

<sup>11</sup> *Daily Penances for Monks* 44 (PG 99.1753B).

<sup>12</sup> *Synggrammata*, ed. I. E. Stephanis (Paphos, 1998), p. 65, lines 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> *Epitimia* 16 (PG 31.1316C).

<sup>14</sup> *Letter* 2 (PG 79.353A).

<sup>15</sup> *Discourse* 3, 4 (ed. Augustinos Iordanites [Jerusalem, 1911], pp. 12-13).



“readiness and alertness”<sup>16</sup>. That is, make them feel that an angel has entered their home.

And one last thing which Abba Isaiah says. Although he was an ascetic, his teachings have a strong social character, in addition to being highly spiritual and theological. He says, then, that if someone—your brother, or your mother, or your wife—cooks food for you, and it doesn’t turn out well, “do not say to them that they have cooked badly”, don’t say it wasn’t what you were expecting, “for this is death for the soul”. It is a great sin to say that the food is not good. Perhaps the one who cooked it had a problem or some other difficulty; perhaps they were not well, perhaps they were tired, or had matters weighing on their mind, and the food was burnt a little. It’s not the end of the world. If we act according to the teaching of the saint, God will bless the monastery, and he will likewise bless our homes, because our home is a monastery. When we act otherwise, the other person gets hurt. And so the Abba says: “Ask yourself how you would feel if you were to hear this from someone else, and then cease”. Don’t you realize that if such a thing were said to you, you’d be upset? Why do you upset your wife or your brother?

Similarly, Abba Isaiah says that, “when you are singing with one another”, that is, when you’re chanting in the choir, “and someone makes a mistake, do not immediately point it out to him or otherwise trouble him with it”. Don’t say to him, “stop singing, you’re making mistakes”, because you’ll upset him, and when he wants to chant or sing, he’ll get it wrong all the time. This is how problems are created in the souls of men.

Of course, these rules of conduct were written for monks, and for the purpose of regulating life in monasteries. They can, however, provide a model for married couples and families. But let’s take a closer look at our life in the world. Once I was traveling at night by train, and the train had to stop for repairs, and so we got off somewhere else, where I met an aged priest with a magnificent beard. He approached me—I was still young, I’d just been ordained, and had hardly any beard at all—and he asked me with great respect: “Are you a priest? Are you an archimandrite?” “Archimandrite”, I replied, and this man, who I afterwards learned was a saint, bent to kiss my hand. Then I asked him: “And who might you be?” To which he said: “I am the abbot of fourteen children, seven of

whom are alive, and seven of whom have been granted a place in heaven. I worked hard for the first seven, and I’m working hard for the rest”.

We all live the same life, in the embrace of Jesus Christ. But there is a difference between a monastery and a marriage. In the monastery, everything is arranged to be easy, whereas in a marriage things are difficult. In order to face the difficulties of life, we need to exercise both our bodies and our souls. In a monastery, a person lives differently, progresses differently. Let me give you an example.

There is an abbot on the Holy Mountain. A gracious man, both of whose hands you feel moved to kiss. He’s a simple man, not highly educated. How did he come to the Holy Mountain? When he was 16 years old, the Theotokos appeared to him and said: “I will show you something you don’t know. I will show you the Holy Mountain”. And in a vision she showed him all the Holy Mountain. Later she showed him a specific monastery and said, “I want you to go to this monastery”. “What is this monastery called?” he asked her. She told him the name of the monastery, but I won’t tell you, because if I did, you’ll know who I’m talking about. The boy—Theokletos, Mariokletos, Panaghiokletos, what are we to call him, since he was called by the Theotokos?—left his home and went to the monastery. Every monk reaches his monastery by a different path, the leaps taken are different, the experiences are different. The boy’s father realized what was happening and set out to stop him. The boy managed to get on a boat and begin his journey. His father suspected that this was the case and boarded the same boat. The boy saw his father, but the father didn’t see him. God covered his eyes. They were on the same boat, they passed one another, they both went into the cabin to eat, but the father didn’t see the boy. He complained to everyone, he shouted: “I have only one son, and he leaves me to go to a monastery”. But he never saw him, because the Theotokos protected him. Finally, they reached a little harbor, and after that a jetty. The boy was amazed because everything was familiar to him. The Theotokos had shown him all of it. He finally arrived at the monastery which the Theotokos had given him. And so, to become a monk in a monastery is to enter into a mystical marriage with Christ.

What is marriage? We said that marriage is like a little monastery. It is a mystery, because through marriage we become “one flesh” with another person (Eph 5.31). What does that mean? It means that, just

<sup>16</sup> Letter 4.41 (PG 79.569C).

as God gives me a gift to become a monk in a particular monastery, and to be successful in that way of life, so he gives a similar gift to the married person. The two become a single person before God. Christ himself assumes them into himself, and makes them one with his own flesh.

The Apostle Peter, speaking of the mystery of marriage, and in this instance addressing women, says that the adornment of a woman consists in the "imperishable quality of a gentle, quiet spirit, which is of great value in the sight of God" (1 Pet 3.4). A wife must show her husband mildness and peace. She should not quarrel with her husband, she should not attack him, nor lose her temper, nor be unhappy. She should be a gentle person. Why does he say this to women, and not to men? Because men are different; they have a different heart, a different psychology. They can easily fly into a rage. They are self-centered. If the wife says something to her husband, he will keep it inside himself, and gradually come to resent her. So the Apostle advises women: be calm, be gentle, do what your husband tells you. And if he becomes angry, smile at him, kiss him, be as gentle as a lamb. And if you remain steadfast and stable, you'll have secured a most precious acquisition, you will have gained a great advantage in the sight of God and men, because everyday your marriage will be a union of love.

He then goes on to say to men: "Show understanding in your married life" (1 Pet 3.7). That is, know what your wife's heart desires; know her story, which she told you when you first met. Don't forget anything that she has told you. Get to know her psychology, because man and woman are not the same thing. I want something different from what she wants. God has made us in a different way. He made human beings male and female so that different things could be linked together, united, and so that something perfect should be the result. Moreover, show in all that you do that you love your wife, that you think about her, that you look after her every need, treating her always "with respect" (1 Pet 3.7). The Apostle tells the husband to show respect to the wife. If you don't respect your wife, you can hurt her deeply, without realizing it. Perhaps you want something, and you insist on it, you shout, you swear, you sulk, you begin to complain, to dredge up things from the past, "you never did this for me, you never gave me that", never realizing for a moment that your wife's heart has been broken. And if it breaks, even if it cracks, it will be difficult to put right. What fine things the Apostle

says! How did the saints know these things? Such wisdom springs and flows from their holiness.

It follows that husband and wife are "joint heirs of God's gift of life" (1 Pet 3.7), because they have both received this gift together. What God has given is not just for you, neither is it just for her, but rather for the both of you. You are joint heirs, and together you will inherit eternal life. And all this is for the sake of prayer, "so that your prayers will not be impeded" (1 Pet 3.7). This means that, if you, the wife, are not a mild person, and if you, the husband, don't respect your wife, if you don't honor her, the two of you will never be able to pray. And that which was one flesh—"they shall be as one flesh" (Eph 5.31)—becomes many pieces of flesh. It becomes wounded flesh, with endless conflicts, problems, and complaints. I have complaints about you, and you have them about me. I'll go to my male friends and complain about my wife, and you go to your female friends to complain about your husband. But without peace and respect, we will never be able to pray, and our life will be filled with wretchedness. If we want to reach God, we must think clearly and properly. Do you see now how your marriage is like a monastery?

The monastic life is a model for human society. Neither democracy, nor monarchy, nor socialism can have this perfection. No system attains to the perfection of the monastic way of life, because it is a truly angelic society. One could also call it a truly "patristic" society, because it is the way in which the Fathers of the Church lived. And marriage too, along with our relations with our neighbor, are also part of this mystery.

For someone to become a monk, he must be sociable, gracious, able to tolerate others, ready to honor others, ready to yield the first place to others, and willing to accept the opinion of others, even when his own opinion is right. At the same time, those who are married must also be sociable and gracious, and even more so, because in the world people rush around, tire themselves out, and consume one another.

If we live in accordance with what the saints tell us, then, whether we desire it or not, our hearts will be filled with heavenly prayer. We will be able to say of our home that "Christ is in our midst", as the priests say during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. And we will not be able to say this simply because we recite long prayers, observe long fasts, go to church, on pilgrimages, or teach in the Sunday school. All these things are good, but their foundation is what the saints have revealed to us today.

In conclusion, I would like to read a few lines from a discourse by St. Basil the Great: "Let words of consolation leap forward before the rest of your speech, confirming your love for your neighbor"<sup>17</sup>. You who are in the monastery, when you approach your brother; you who are married, when you approach your spouse; you who are a father or a mother, when you approach your child: "Let words of consolation leap forward before the rest of your speech". Whatever you say, whatever you think of saying, say it only after you've said a word or two which will give the others joy, consolation, a breath of life. Make them say "I feel relief, I feel joy". Make others proud of you, love you, dance for joy when they see you. Because everybody in their life, in their home, in their body, and in their soul, has pain, illness, difficulties, torments, and everybody hides them within the secret purse of his heart and home, so that others won't know about it. I don't know what sort of pain you're in, and you don't know what pain I'm in. I may laugh, shout, and appear happy, but deep down, I'm in pain, and I laugh to cover up my sorrow. And so before anything else, greet the other person with a smile.

And St. Basil adds this: "Let your face be bright, in order to give joy to him who speaks with you". Once you've made the other person smile, don't stop smiling. This is what it means to have a "bright face". Let your face be a radiant sun, so that throughout the conversation the other will continue to feel the same happiness. "Take delight in every achievement of your neighbor". With respect to whatever achievement your neighbor has, rejoice along with him. "For his achievements are yours, and yours are his". Let the one share in the joy of the other.

In this way there can be a meeting, a true social relation, of monks and married people, of all people, saints and sinners, giving us all the right and the ability to pray. And when we say: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me", everybody is included: my husband, my wife, my brothers and sisters, my children, the whole world. When God sees such love, when he sees the paradise in my heart, that my heart has room in it for everybody, then it will be impossible for him not to find room in his paradise for me and for you.

<sup>17</sup> *Ascetical Discourse 8* (PG 31.644B).

## MARRIAGE: THE GREAT SACRAMENT\*

Nobody would dispute that the most important day in a person's life, after his birth and baptism, is that of his marriage. It is no surprise, then, that the aim of contemporary worldly and institutional upheavals is precisely to crush the most honorable and sacred mystery of marriage.

For many people, marriage is an opportunity for pleasures and amusements. Life, however, is a serious affair. It is a spiritual struggle, a progression toward a goal—heaven. The most crucial juncture, and the most important means, of this progression is marriage. It is not permissible for anyone to avoid the bonds of marriage, whether he concludes a mystical marriage by devoting himself to God, or whether he concludes a sacramental one with a spouse.

Today we will concern ourselves primarily with sacramental marriage. We will consider how marriage can contribute to our spiritual life, in order to continue the theme of our previous talk<sup>1</sup>. We know that marriage is an institution established by God. It is "honorable" (Heb 13.4). It is a "great mystery" (Eph 5.32). An unmarried person passes through life and leaves it; but a married person lives and experiences life to the full.

One wonders what people today think about the sacred institution of marriage, this "great mystery", blessed by our Church. They marry, and it's as if two checking accounts or two business interests were being merged. Two people are united without ideals, two zeros, you could say. Because people without ideals, without quests, are nothing more than zeros. "I married in order to live my life", you hear people say, "and not to be shut inside four walls". "I married to enjoy my life", they say, and then they hand over their children—if they have children—to some strange woman so they can run off to the theater, the movies, or to some

\* A Sermon delivered in the Church of St. Nicholas, Trikala, Greece, 17 January, 1971.

<sup>1</sup> I.e., "Spiritual Life", which appears below, on pp. 147-163.

other worldly gathering. And so their houses become hotels to which they return in the evening, or, rather, after midnight, after they've had their fun and need to rest. Such people are empty inside, and so in their homes they feel a real void. They find no gratification there, and thus they rush and slide from here to there, in order to find their happiness.

They marry without knowledge, without a sense of responsibility, or simply because they wish to get married, or because they think they must in order to be good members of society. But what is the result? We see it every day. The shipwrecks of marriage are familiar to all of us. A worldly marriage, as it is understood today, can only have one characteristic—the murder of a person's spiritual life. Thus we must feel that, if we fail in our marriage, we have more or less failed in our spiritual life. If we succeed in our marriage, we have also succeeded in our spiritual life. Success or failure, progress or ruin, in our spiritual life, begins with our marriage. Because this is such a serious matter, let us consider some of the conditions necessary for a happy, truly Christian marriage.

In order to have a successful marriage, one must have the appropriate upbringing from an early age. Just as a child must study, just as he learns to think, and take an interest in his parents or his health, so too must he be prepared in order to be able to have a successful marriage. But in the age in which we live, no one is interested in preparing their children for this great mystery, a mystery which will play the foremost role in their lives. Parents are not interested, except in the dowry, or in other such financial matters, in which they are deeply interested.

The child, from an early age, must learn to love, to give, to suffer deprivation, to obey. He must learn to feel that the purity of his soul and body is a valuable treasure to be cherished as the apple of his eye. The character of the child must be shaped properly, so that he becomes an honest, brave, decisive, sincere, cheerful person, and not a half, self-pitying creature, who constantly bemoans his fate, a weak-willed thing without any power of thought or strength. From an early age, the child should learn to take an interest in a particular subject or occupation, so that tomorrow he will be in a position to support his family, or, in the case of a girl, also to help, if this is necessary. A woman must learn to be a housewife, even if she has an education. She should learn to cook, to sew, to embroider. But, my good Father, you may say, this is all self-evident. Ask married couples, however, and you'll see how many women who are about to marry know nothing about running a household.

Once we reach a certain age, moreover, the choice of one's life partner is a matter which should not be put off. Neither should one be in a hurry, because, as the saying goes, "quick to marry, quick to despair". But one should not delay, because delay is a mortal danger to the soul. As a rule, the normal rhythm of the spiritual life begins with marriage. An unmarried person is like someone trying to live permanently in a hallway: he doesn't seem to know what the rooms are for. Parents should take an interest in the child's social life, but also in his prayer life, so that the blessed hour will come as a gift sent by God.

Naturally, when he comes to choose a partner, he will take into account his parents' opinion. How often have parents felt knives piercing their hearts when their children don't ask them about the person who will be their companion in life? A mother's heart is sensitive, and can't endure such a blow. The child should discuss matters with his parents, because they have a special intuition enabling them to be aware of the things which concern them. But this doesn't mean that the father and mother should pressure the child. Ultimately he should be free to make his own decision. If you pressure your child to marry, he will consider you responsible if things don't go well. Nothing good comes from pressure. You must help him, but you must also allow him to choose the person he prefers or loves—but not someone he pities or feels sorry for. If your child, after getting to know someone, tells you, "I feel sorry for the poor soul, I'll marry him", then you know that you're on the threshold of a failed marriage. Only a person whom he or she prefers or loves can stand by the side of your child. Both the man and the woman should be attracted to each other, and they should truly want to live together, in an inward way, unhurriedly. On this matter, however, it is not possible to pressure our children. Sometimes, out of our love, we feel that they are our possessions, that they are our property, and that we can do what we want with them. And thus our child becomes a creature incapable of living life either married or unmarried.

Of course, the process of getting acquainted, which is such a delicate issue—but of which we are often heedless—should take place before marriage. We should never be complacent about getting to know each other, especially if we're not sure of our feelings. Love shouldn't blind us. It should open our eyes, to see the other person as he is, with his faults. "Better to take a shoe from your own house, even if its cob-

bled", says the folk proverb. That is, it's better to take someone you've gotten to know. And acquaintanceship must always be linked with engagement, which is an equally difficult matter.

When I suggested to a young woman that she should think seriously about whether she should continue her engagement, she replied: "If I break it off, my mother will kill me". But what sort of engagement is it, if there's no possibility of breaking it off? To get engaged doesn't mean that I'll necessarily get married. It means that I'm testing to see whether I should marry the person I'm engaged to. If a woman isn't in a position to break off her engagement, she shouldn't get engaged, or, rather, she shouldn't go ahead with the marriage. During the engagement, we must be especially careful. If we are, we will have fewer problems and fewer disappointments after the wedding. Someone once said that, during the period of getting to know one another, you should hold on to your heart firmly with both hands, as if it were a wild animal. You know how dangerous the heart is: instead of leading you to marriage, it can lead you into sin. There is the possibility that the person you've chosen sees you as a mere toy, or a toothbrush to be tried out. Afterwards you'll be depressed and shed many tears. But then it will be too late, because your angel will have turned out to be made of clay.

Don't choose a person who wastes his time at clubs, having a good time, and throwing away his money on traveling and luxuries. Neither should you choose someone who, as you'll find out, conceals his self-centeredness beneath words of love. Don't choose a woman as your wife who is like gunpowder, so that as soon as you say something to her, she bursts into flames. She's no good as a wife.

Moreover, if you want to have a truly successful marriage, don't approach that young woman or man who is unable to leave his or her parents. The commandment of Christ is clear: "A man leaves his father and mother, and is united to his wife" (Mk 10.7). But when you see the other person tied to his mother or father, when you see that he obeys them with his mouth hanging open, and is prepared to do whatever they tell him, keep well away. He is emotionally sick, a psychologically immature person, and you won't be able to create a family with him. The man you will make your husband should be spirited. But how can he be spirited when he hasn't realized, hasn't understood, hasn't digested the fact that his parents' house was simply a flower-pot in which he was put, to be taken out later, and transplanted somewhere else?

Also, when you're going to choose a husband, make sure that he's not an uncommunicative type—in which case he'll have no friends. And if today he has no friends, tomorrow he'll find it difficult to have you as a friend and partner. Be on your guard against grumblers, moaners, and gloomy people who are like dejected birds. Be on your guard against those who complain all the time: "You don't love me, you don't understand me", and all that sort of thing. Something about these creatures of God isn't right. Also be on your guard against religious fanatics and the overly pious. Those, that is, who get upset over trivial things, who are critical of everything and hypersensitive. How are you going to live with such a person? It will be like sitting on thorns. Also look out for those who regard marriage as something bad, as a form of imprisonment. Those who say: But I've never in my whole life thought about getting married.

Watch out for certain pseudo-Christians, who see marriage as something sordid, as a sin, who immediately cast their eyes down when they hear anything said about it<sup>2</sup>. If you marry someone like this, he will be a thorn in your flesh, and a burden for his monastery if he becomes a monk. Watch out for those who think that they're perfect, and find no defect in themselves, while constantly finding faults in others. Watch out for those who think they've been chosen by God to correct everyone else.

There is another serious matter to which you should also pay attention: heredity. Get to know well the father, the mother, the grandfather, the grandmother, the uncle. Also, the basic material prerequisites should be there. Above all, pay attention to the person's faith. Does he or she have faith? Has the person whom you're thinking of making the companion of your life have ideals? If Christ means nothing to him, how are you going to be able to enter his heart? If he has not been able to value Christ, do you think he will value you? Holy Scripture says to the husband that the wife should be "of your testament" (Mal 2.14), that is, of your faith, your religion, so that she can join you to God. It is only then that you can have, as the Church Fathers say, a marriage "with the consent of the bishop"<sup>3</sup>, that is, with the approval of the Church, and not simply a formal license.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, John Chrysostom, *Homily on Colossians* 12.6: "What shame is there in that which is honorable? Why do you blush over what is undefiled? In so doing, you slander the root of our birth, which is a gift from God" (PG 62.388).

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to Polycarp* 5 (PG 5.724B).



Discuss things in advance with your spiritual father. Examine every detail with him, and he will stand by your side as a true friend, and, when you reach the desired goal, then your marriage will be a gift from God (cf. 1 Cor 7.7). God gives his own gift to each one of us. He leads one person to marriage and another to virginity. Not that God makes the choice by saying "you go here", and "you go there", but he gives us the nerve to choose what our heart desires, and the courage and the strength to carry it out.

If you choose your spouse in this way, then thank God. Bring him into touch with your spiritual father. If you don't have one, the two of you should choose a spiritual father together, who will be your Elder, your father, the one who will remind you of, and show you God.

You will have many difficulties in life. There will be a storm of issues. Worries will surround you, and maintaining your Christian life will not be easy. But don't worry. God will help you. Do what is within your power. Can you read a spiritual book for five minutes a day? Then read. Can you pray for five minutes a day? Pray. And if you can't manage five minutes, pray for two. The rest is God's affair.

When you see difficulties in your marriage, when you see that you're making no progress in your spiritual life, don't despair. But neither should you be content with whatever progress you may have already made. Lift up your heart to God. Imitate those who have given everything to God, and do what you can to be like them, even if all you can do is to desire in your heart to be like them. Leave the action to Christ. And when you advance in this way, you will truly sense what is the purpose of marriage. Otherwise, as a blind person wanders about, so too will you wander in life.

What then is the purpose of marriage? I will tell you three of its main aims. First of all, marriage is a path of pain. The companionship of man and wife is called a "yoking together" (*συζυγία*), that is, the two of them labor under a shared burden. Marriage is a journeying together, a shared portion of pain, and, of course, a joy. But usually it's six chords of our life which sound a sorrowful note, and only one which is joyous. Man and wife will drink from the same cup of upheaval, sadness, and failure. During the marriage ceremony, the priest gives the newly-weds to drink from the same cup, called the "common cup"<sup>4</sup>,

<sup>4</sup> Symeon of Thessaloniki, *Dialogos* 277 (PG 155.508B).

because together they will bear the burdens of marriage. The cup is also called "union"<sup>5</sup>, because they are joined together to share life's joys and sorrows.

When two people get married, it's as if they're saying: Together we will go forward, hand in hand, through good times and bad. We will have dark hours, hours of sorrow filled with burdens, monotonous hours. But in the depths of the night, we continue to believe in the sun and the light. Oh, my dear friends, who can say that his life has not been marked by difficult moments? But it is no small thing to know that, in your difficult moments, in your worries, in your temptations, you will be holding in your hand the hand of your beloved. The New Testament says that every man will have pain, especially those who enter into marriage. "Are you free from a wife?"—which means, are you unmarried?—asks the Apostle Paul. "Then do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you are not doing anything wrong, it is no sin. And if a girl marries, she does not sin, but those who marry will have hardships to endure, and my aim is to spare you" (1 Cor 7.27-28). Remember: from the moment you marry, he says, you will have much pain, you will suffer, and your life will be a cross, but a cross blossoming with flowers. Your marriage will have its joys, its smiles, and its beautiful things. But during the days of sunshine, remember that all the lovely flowers conceal a cross, which can emerge into your sunshine at any moment.

Life is not a party, as some people think, and after they get married take a fall from heaven to earth. Marriage is a vast ocean, and you don't know where it will wash you up. You take the person whom you've chosen with fear and trembling, and with great care, and after a year, two years, five years, you discover that he's fooled you.

It is an adulteration of marriage for us to think that it is a road to happiness, as if it were a denial of the cross. The joy of marriage is for husband and wife to put their shoulders to the wheel and together go forward on the uphill road of life. "You haven't suffered? Then you haven't loved", says a certain poet. Only those who suffer can really love. And that's why sadness is a necessary feature of marriage. "Marriage", in the words of an ancient philosopher, "is a world made beautiful by hope, and strengthened by misfortune". Just as steel is fashioned in a furnace,

<sup>5</sup> Kallinikos, *The Christian Temple and its Ceremonies* (Athens, 1968), 514.

just so is a person proved in marriage, in the fire of difficulties. When you see your marriage from a distance, everything seems wonderful. But when you get closer, you'll see just how many difficult moments it has.

God says that "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2.18), and so he placed a companion at his side, someone to help him throughout his life, especially in his struggles of faith, because in order to keep your faith, you must suffer and endure much pain. God sends his grace to all of us. He sends it, however, when he sees that we are willing to suffer. Some people, as soon as they see obstacles, run away. They forget God and the Church. But faith, God, and the Church, are not a shirt that you take off as soon as you start to sweat.

Marriage, then, is a journey through sorrows and joys. When the sorrows seem overwhelming, then you should remember that God is with you. He will take up your cross. It was he who placed the crown of marriage on your head. But when we ask God about something, he doesn't always supply the solution right away. He leads us forward very slowly. Sometime he takes years. We have to experience pain, otherwise life would have no meaning. But be of good cheer, for Christ is suffering with you, and the Holy Spirit, "through your groanings ... is pleading on your behalf" (cf. Rom 8.26).

Second, marriage is a journey of love. It is the creation of a new human being, a new person, for, as the Gospel says, "the two will be as one flesh" (Mt 19.5; Mk 10.7). God unites two people, and makes them one. From this union of two people, who agree to synchronize their footsteps and harmonize the beating of their hearts, a new human being emerges. Through such profound and spontaneous love, the one becomes a presence, a living reality, in the heart of the other. "I am married" means that I cannot live a single day, even a few moments, without the companion of my life. My husband, my wife, is a part of my being, of my flesh, of my soul. He or she complements me. He or she is the thought of my mind. He or she is the reason for which my heart beats.

The couple exchanges rings to show that, in life's changes, they will remain united. Each wears a ring with the name of the other written on it, which is placed on the finger from which a vein runs directly to the heart. That is, the name of the other is written on his own heart. The one, we could say, gives the blood of his heart to the other. He or she encloses the other within the core of his being.

"What do you do?" a novelist was once asked. He was taken aback. "What do I do? What a strange question! I love Olga, my wife". The husband lives to love his wife, and the wife lives to love her husband.

The most fundamental thing in marriage is love, and love is about uniting two into one. God abhors separation and divorce. He wants unbroken unity (cf. Mt 19.3-9; Mk 10.2-12). The priest takes the rings off the left finger, puts them on the right, and then again on the left, and finally he puts them back on the right hand. He begins and ends with the right hand, because this is the hand with which we chiefly act. It also means that the other now has my hand. I don't do anything that my spouse doesn't want. I am bound up with the other. I live for the other, and for that reason I tolerate his faults. A person who can't put up with another can't marry.

What does my partner want? What interests him? What gives him pleasure? That should also interest and please me as well. I also look for opportunities to give him little delights. How will I please my husband today? How will I please my wife today? This is the question which a married person must ask every day. She is concerned about his worries, his interests, his job, his friends, so that they can have everything in common. He gladly gives way to her. Because he loves her, he goes to bed last and gets up first in the morning. He regards her parents as his own, and loves them and is devoted to them, because he knows that marriage is difficult for parents. It always makes them cry, because it separates them from their child.

The wife expresses love for her husband through obedience. She is obedient to him exactly as the Church is to Christ (Eph 5.22-24). It is her happiness to do the will of her husband. Attitude, obstinacy, and complaining are the axes which chop down the tree of conjugal happiness. The woman is the heart. The man is the head. The woman is the heart that loves. In her husband's moments of difficulty, she stands at his side, as the empress Theodora stood by the emperor Justinian. In his moments of joy, she tries to raise him up to even higher heights and ideals. In times of sorrow, she stands by him like a sublime and peaceful world offering him tranquility.

The husband should remember that his wife has been entrusted to him by God. His wife is a soul which God has given to him, and one day he must return it. He loves his wife as Christ loves the Church (Eph 5.25).

He protects her, takes care of her, gives her security, particularly when she is distressed, or when she is ill. We know how sensitive a woman's soul can be, which is why the Apostle Peter urges husbands to honor their wives (cf. 1 Pet 3.7). A woman's soul gets wounded, is often petty, changeable, and can suddenly fall into despair. Thus the husband should be full of love and tenderness, and make himself her greatest treasure. Marriage, my dear friends, is a little boat which sails through waves and among rocks. If you lose your attention even for a moment, it will be wrecked.

As we have seen, marriage is first of all a journey of pain; second a journey of love; and, third, a journey to heaven, a call from God. It is, as Holy Scripture says, a "great mystery" (Eph 5.32). We often speak of seven "mysteries", or sacraments. In this regard, a "mystery" is the sign of the mystical presence of some true person or event. An icon, for instance, is a mystery. When we venerate it, we are not venerating wood or paint, but Christ, or the Theotokos, or the saint who is mystically depicted. The Holy Cross is a symbol of Christ, containing his mystical presence. Marriage, too, is a mystery, a mystical presence, not unlike these. Christ says, "wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am among them" (Mt 18.20). And whenever two people are married in the name of Christ, they become the sign which contains and expresses Christ himself. When you see a couple who are conscious of this, it is as if you are seeing Christ. Together they are a theophany.

This is also why crowns are placed on their heads during the wedding ceremony, because the bride and groom are an image of Christ and the Church. And not just this, but everything in marriage is symbolic. The lit candles symbolize the wise virgins. When the priest places these candles into the hands of the newly-weds, it is as if he is saying to them: Wait for Christ like the wise virgins (Mt 25.1-11). Or they symbolize the tongues of fire which descended at Pentecost, and which were in essence the presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1-4). The wedding rings are kept on the altar, until they are taken from there by the priest, which shows that marriage has its beginning in Christ, and will end in Christ. The priest also joins their hands, in order to show that it is Christ himself who unites them. It is Christ who is at the heart of the mystery and at the center of their lives<sup>6</sup>.

All the elements of the marriage ceremony are shadows and symbols which indicate the presence of Christ. When you're sitting somewhere and suddenly you see a shadow, you know that someone's coming. You don't see him, but you know he's there. You get up early in the morning, and you see the red horizon in the east. You know that, in a little while, the sun will come up. And indeed, there behind the mountain, the sun starts to appear.

When you see your marriage, your husband, your wife, your partner's body, when you see your troubles, everything in your home, know that they are all signs of Christ's presence. It is as if you're hearing Christ's footsteps, as if he was coming, as if you are now about to hear his voice. All these things are the shadows of Christ, revealing that he is together with us. It is true, though, that, because of our cares and worries, we feel that he is absent. But we can see him in the shadows, and we are sure that he is with us. This is why there was no separate marriage service in the early Church. The man and woman simply went to church and received Communion together. What does this mean? That henceforth their life is one life in Christ.

The wreaths, or wedding crowns, are also symbols of Christ's presence. More specifically, they are symbols of martyrdom. Husband and wife wear crowns to show that they are ready to become martyrs for Christ. To say that "I am married" means that I live and die for Christ. "I am married" means that I desire and thirst for Christ. Crowns are also signs of royalty, and thus husband and wife are king and queen, and their home is a kingdom, a kingdom of the Church, an extension of the Church.

When did marriage begin? When man sinned. Before that, there was no marriage, not in the present-day sense. It was only after the Fall, after Adam and Eve had been expelled from paradise, that Adam "knew" Eve (Gen 4.1) and thus marriage began. Why then? So that they might remember their fall and expulsion from paradise, and seek to return there. Marriage is thus a return to the spiritual paradise, the Church of Christ. "I am married" means, then, that I am a king, a true and faithful member of the Church.

The wreaths also symbolize the final victory which will be attained in the kingdom of heaven. When the priest takes the wreaths, he says to Christ: "take their crowns to your kingdom", take them to your king-

<sup>6</sup> St. Gregory the Theologian, *Letter* 193: "I place the hand of the one in the other, and place both in the hand of God" (PG 37.316C).

dom, and keep them there, until the final victory. And so marriage is a road: its starts out from the earth and ends in heaven. It is a joining together, a bond with Christ, who assures us that he will lead us to heaven, to be with him always. Marriage is a bridge leading us from earth to heaven. It is as if the sacrament is saying: Above and beyond love, above and beyond your husband, your wife, above the everyday events, remember that you are destined for heaven, that you have set out on a road which will take you there without fail. The bride and the bridegroom give their hands to one another, and the priest takes hold of them both, and leads them round the table dancing and singing. Marriage is a movement, a progression, a journey which will end in heaven, in eternity.

In marriage, it seems that two people come together. However it's not two but three. The man marries the woman, and the woman marries the man, but the two together also marry Christ. So three take part in the mystery, and three remain together in life.

In the dance around the table, the couple are led by the priest, who is a type of Christ. This means that Christ has seized us, rescued us, redeemed us, and made us his. And this is the "great mystery" of marriage (cf. Gal 3.13).

In Latin, the word "mystery" was rendered by the word "sacramentum", which means an oath. And marriage is an oath, a pact, a joining together, a bond, as we have said. It is a permanent bond with Christ.

"I am married", then, means that I enslave my heart to Christ. If you wish, you can get married. If you wish, don't get married. But if you marry, this is the meaning that marriage has in the Orthodox Church, which brought you into being. "I am married" means I am the slave of Christ.

## SPIRITUAL STUDY\*

The subject of the spiritual life, which we embarked upon last Sunday, is a major one.<sup>1</sup> We saw that the spiritual life is like a road which sets out from this life with the aim of reaching heaven. It is a life propelled by the wings of the Holy Spirit, because it's not possible to arrive in heaven on foot. We can't get there by means of our own abilities, by our own efforts, or on the strength of our personal virtues. We must be carried on the powerful and swift wings of the Holy Spirit. We must rely entirely on divine grace, while at the same time toiling and striving with all our strength, sacrificing all that we have for the sake of union with Christ.

We subsequently looked at one of the ways to live a spiritual life, namely, marriage, which we said was a sacramental sign of the presence of God<sup>2</sup>. In marriage, the Holy Spirit unites the present with the future, as well as every moment of our lives, with eternity. Today let us look at a second mystical sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit: spiritual study.

Beginning from childhood, most people spend a lot of time reading. And today, in the age of science, literature, and progress, you have to read a lot. If you don't, it's like being blind. You read and you urge your child to read, so he won't be a failure in life. Everybody reads in accordance with his training and specialization, or depending on his education, capabilities, and his social position—some less, some more.

Your child, if he goes to school, may read works of philosophy, or the writings of ancient classical authors, in order to cultivate his mind. And I imagine that you certainly urge him to study foreign languages, because they say that knowing a foreign language is like having an extra pair of eyes. Your child reads books on society, encyclopedia articles, scientific books, and I don't know what else, in order to be in touch with the world around him; to be able to understand and communicate with others; to have his feet firmly on the ground when dealing with

\* A Sermon delivered in the Church of St. Nicholas, Trikala, Greece, 24 January, 1971.

<sup>1</sup> See "Spiritual Life", below, pp. 147-163.

<sup>2</sup> 2. See "Marriage: The Great Sacrament", above, pp. 111-125.

the circumstances and demands of life; to be, in short, an upstanding member of society.

All this is useful. But it isn't enough, and neither can all of us read and study such books. And here we are speaking of the spiritual life, and thus about books which we must necessarily read, because we need them on our journey to heaven. When you read these books, you sense at once that God is speaking to you. They are tools for the spiritual life, and without them it is impossible to find paradise.

What are these books, which are so central to the Christian life? They exist in great numbers. They are those which we call, in a word, spiritual books. And because our theme today is spiritual study, which is a mystical sign of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, permit me to speak only about certain kinds of spiritual books. It isn't possible for me to deal with them all, but only those which the Church has singled out—based on her history, her life, and her blood—and given us for our daily pleasure and delight. These are books in which you don't read human thoughts, human criteria, or human logic, but rather encounter the judgment and the logic of God, the Spirit of God. God speaks in these books. Who wrote these books? The authors were divinely inspired instruments who became the servants of the Holy Spirit.

I will focus on those books given to you by the Church. You open them up, and right away you realize that God is talking to you. You feel at once the beating of the Spirit's wings. You feel God answering your questions. You see him dispersing your darkness, clearing away old obstacles, opening up new pathways. Then, filled with joy, you cry out: "Behold, I have begun to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes" (Gen 18.27). I have begun to converse with God, with my Christ. And who am I to speak with God? I am ashes, I am clay. But God does me this favor.

If you don't have these books with you on your journey, you'll never reach your goal. It is through these books that God calls you. It is through these books that he shows you where to go. He says to you: "Come, my child, ascend to the heights". You feel this. You feel it like the holy man who would excuse himself from company by saying: "Someone is waiting for me in my room". They didn't know who it was. They thought it was a person, but he went to his books, where God was waiting for him<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* 12.2 (Abba Arsenios) (PG 65.92A).

What, then, are these books? First and foremost are those which are called patristic books, that is, the writings of the Fathers of the Church, those men, who we said, were the instruments of the Holy Spirit, and who were like fire when they spoke and lightning when they wrote. Thanks to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have left us their immortal masterpieces. Truly, what would the world be like without the Holy Fathers? They lived by prayer, in vigils, and in fasting. They loved God with all their soul, and God loved them unreservedly, deeming them worthy to leave us their immortal writings, more precious than all the gold in the world (cf. Ps 18.11; 118.72).

All the Fathers of the Church lived more or less the same way of life. If we take a look at one of them, St. Basil the Great, it will be as if we had before us a gathering of all the holy Fathers. St. Basil attended the greatest schools of his day, where he studied philosophy, rhetoric, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine. He became an orator. The future seemed to smile on him, and his life was one success after another. But what happened then? This beautiful soul, this shining mind, this sensitive and God-enamored heart, was incapable of being enslaved to an earthly career. Thus he left his family and friends and went to live in the deserts of Pontus. For five years he lived a life of great hardship and deprivation, even though he had been in ill health from his childhood, and many times had come close to death. There he lived, in the mold and the damp, under the most difficult conditions, in something like a cellar, far away from the voices of men<sup>4</sup>.

One night, shortly after midnight, as his brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa, tells us, there appeared to him an "outpouring of light, and, by means of divine power, the entire dwelling was illuminated by an immaterial light, having no source in anything material"<sup>5</sup>. In his small hut, St. Basil was visited by God. Divine lightning flashed forth, the darkness became like day, and Basil himself became like the sun. All was a single light, shining from a place nowhere in the world. Just as Christ entered the upper room, although the doors and windows were shut (Jn 20.26), so too did he enter into the room of St. Basil the Great. And Basil saw him with the spiritual eyes of his soul, and said: "What is

<sup>4</sup> St. Gregory the Theologian, *Funeral Oration on Basil the Great* 13, 14, 23 (PG 36.512-513, 525C-528); id., *Letter* 5 (PG 37.28C-29B).

<sup>5</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Funeral Oration on his brother Basil the Great* (PG 46.809C).



more marvelous, more worthy of love, than the beauty of God?"<sup>6</sup> On the basis of this divine illumination, he wrote the masterpieces which he left behind to illuminate us.

This is more or less how all the Fathers of the Church wrote their books, through which they take us by the hand, and lead us from one summit to another, from one peak to another, passing beyond the stars, to the throne of God, and to the friends of God, the saints. This is how St. Chrysostom wrote, and this is how that eagle of the Spirit, St. Gregory the Theologian, wrote as well.

But, Father, you'll say, all this is wonderful, but where are we to find such books? Don't worry. If you haven't already looked for them, you'll see how easy it is to find them, and read them, even if you've never gone to school, and have only the most basic of educations. Today there are so many editions and translations of these books, that all of the Church Fathers are readily accessible. Not long ago, your ever-memorable Metropolitan, Dionysios, published two books containing translations of the Church Fathers<sup>7</sup>. And there are dozens of books containing the sermons of St. John Chrysostom, and dozens more with the writings of Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian, St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain, and so many other Fathers of the Church. And their message is simple.

In reading them, your eyes will be opened (cf. Ps 18.9). Imagine sitting in the dark, and suddenly I come near you, and I shine a light in your face, and your eyes open wide and are dazzled by the light—that's exactly what will happen when you read the writings of the Fathers of the Church. One could also say that their writings are like lenses which enable us to gaze steadily on the sun, on Christ himself.

Let's turn now to another category of books, the lives of the saints, the friends of the Church, who have bent down to the breast of Christ, and live within his heart. They are Christ's family, and we must be with them, close to Christ. Do we know the saints of our Church? They are our brothers and sisters. We are members of the same family. We have the same father, God, and the same mother, the Church. We eat the same food, Holy Communion. We have all come forth from the same

spiritual womb, have been nourished on the same milk, dined at the same table. Do we know our siblings, the saints of the Church?

When you read the lives of the saints, you have before your very eyes living translations of the Gospel, and you will be greatly inspired. Little by little you'll get to know them. You'll see how they were born, who their mother was, how they began life, how they poured forth sweat, sacred tears, how they blessed the earth with their precious, warm blood. And that blood was one with the blood of Christ. You'll be inspired, and you'll feel like leaping in the air to reach the heights of heaven. When you read their lives, you'll have the feeling that they're with you, that you can hear them breathing. It's as if we're all sitting around somewhere, and at one point I say: "Let's go for a stroll". And so we walk, and talk, and we're all very friendly, just like a family. That's how you'll feel with the saints, when you get to know them, when you read their lives. You'll immediately say to yourself: This saint was a man like me. How did he become a saint? I, too, can become a saint. You see their courage, their love of God, and your heart is set afire, you become inspired, and you want even to surpass them.

"Wondrous is God in his saints" (Ps 67.36). The saints glorified God. And there is a great cloud of thousands of saints (cf. Heb 12.1) who have yet to receive their crowns, because they're waiting for us. Just like when your family gathers for dinner, and one of the children is late, and everyone waits for him, so it is with the saints, who are waiting for all of us, for me, and for you (cf. Heb 11.39-40). Have you ever thought what it means for you to delay your spiritual journey? Think about all the saints who are waiting for you, while you sit there wasting your time on meaningless things. Forget about those things. Wherever you are, lift up your heart! Whether you're in your home, at your shop, with your children, or with your spouse. And if you're in a difficult place, lift up your heart and hold it high. You'll be able to do this if you read the lives of the saints, and immerse yourself in their boundless enthusiasm.

Third, let's look at the books we use in church. What beautiful things we hear being read from the Psalter! And when you read the *Parakletike*, you feel a healing balm covering your soul. Reading the *Triodion*, which is chanted during Great Lent, you feel, even without wanting to, your eyes filling with tears. Not false, emotional tears, but those which come from the depths of the soul. When you read the *Pentecostarion*, your soul smiles, and you feel like you're living in heaven. And if you

<sup>6</sup> St. Basil, *Long Rules* 2.1 (PG 31.909C); cf. id., *Homily on Psalm 29* 5 (PG 29.317B).

<sup>7</sup> I.e., Dionysios Charalambos, who became Metropolitan of Trikkis and Stagon in 1959, and devoted himself to the revitalization of monastic life in his Metropolis. Here the Elder is referring to the Metropolitan's *Paterikon Kyriakodromion*, 2 vols (Athens, 1968-1969).

don't have all these books, you should at least have a *Synekdemos*, which is a synopsis of all of them. Get a *Synekdemos* and learn how to use it. You'll see how much it will benefit you.

And if you're educated, you should learn to read theological books, which speak about the Holy Faith of Christ. The Faith which the heretics trample on, but which you should shelter in your head and in your heart.

One more type of book, which I purposely left for the end, is the most important of all. Which one is that? Holy Scripture. The New Testament. The Old Testament. Do we read these books? I fear that we don't, especially the Old Testament. But that is precisely where God speaks the most clearly: "Thus says the Lord". God is speaking. And the most uneducated person can read Holy Scripture. If he doesn't understand parts of it today, he'll understand them tomorrow.

I remember when I was still a student, I had gone to a school in order to teach. Young man that I was, I went to speak with the students. Outside the school was a little old lady, who was selling bread. She taught me much, and humbled me much! She was reading:

"What are you reading?" I asked her.

"The Gospel", my child.

"Do you understand it?"

"If I read it twice. I read the passages a second time, and I understand them better than the first. And if I read the whole thing again from the beginning, I understand it all even better".

God, forgive me, I said to myself.

"Did you know", I said to her, "that there are translations of the Gospel that you can read?"

"Really? How much are they? I'll borrow some money, give it to you, and you can bring me one".

But she didn't need one. I sent her one anyway, free, as a gift, but she didn't need it. Her soul was on fire for God, and if you have that fire, God tells you everything.

Holy Scripture is the greatest gift which God has given to man. Let's understand that! Remember the author, whose house was filled with hundreds of books, who said to his wife:

"Bring me my book".

"What book?"

"My dear, do you have to ask? There's only one, Holy Scripture", answered the great author. He read from it every morning in order to light the lamp of his soul, to be illumined by God.

Now let's look at what we need to do in order to succeed at our spiritual study, and let's also see what its fruits are.

First, in order to read spiritual books, and for them to find an echo in your soul, you have to work hard and you have to pray. Let's admit it, we're lazy. I imagine you've seen homes where the bookshelves are false, and are lined with the painted spines of books! When you first see these things you say, What a marvelous library! What classics! Homer's *Iliad*, Thucydides' *History*, the *Orations* of Demosthenes... but when you try to take one off the shelf, you can't, because they're not books at all, but simply paintings of books. Such people don't read, but simply want to show others how cultivated they are.

We should realize, though, that our souls don't need food, but spiritual books, because these contain the word of God<sup>8</sup>. You should read "day and night", as Scripture says (Ps 1.2), whether you're "standing, sitting, or lying in bed" (cf. Deut 6.7). At every opportunity, go off to a quiet corner of your home. Leave the noise outside, close the door behind you, open up a book, and enjoy it. And if you can read spiritual books at night, even if it's only once a week, then you'll really experience God's blessings<sup>9</sup>. "In the night my spirit rises to you like the dawn, because your commandments are a light upon the earth" (Isa 26.9). At night, light your godly lamp, and light up the world.

Make an effort to find some quiet time, and you'll find that you'll come to know God, that all of your doubts will disappear, all of your troubles. When the sun rises, as the ancients say, it should always find you with a book in your hands<sup>10</sup>. Before reading, though, you should pray, so that God can open your mind and your heart (cf. Ps 118.18-19). He can do that.

Whatever you read, make sure you read all of it. Let's say, for example, you're reading the Gospel. Read everything, even that which you think seems superfluous or difficult. Perhaps in some corner of the Gospel, or of the Old Testament, you'll come across a little pearl.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 11 on Genesis* 8 (PG 53.90).

<sup>9</sup> St. Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetical Homily* 20 (ed. Nikephoros Theotokis (Athens, n.d.), pp. 122-23; cf. *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian* (Boston, 1984), p. 101-102).

<sup>10</sup> See the work *On Virginity* 12 (PG 28.265A), attributed to St. Athanasios.

But that little pearl, small though it is, will be of greater value to you than a mountain.

Don't try to find in Holy Scripture prescriptions and rules for your life. At the same time, rid yourself of the desire to insert your own thoughts into the text. You should be reading to learn what God says, and God will inspire you. And you should accept whatever God tells you. But perhaps now you're thinking to yourself that all of this is a bit naïve; that such things don't have a place in the modern world. What you say might be fine for people living in monasteries, you'll tell me, but we've got things to do, jobs to go to, problems to deal with. I see. So the Christian life is only for monks and nuns? But what did we say? We open our homes for Christ to enter them<sup>11</sup>. The notion that it's no longer possible to apply the truths of Christianity to our lives is like nitric acid. I've heard that if you throw a little of it onto a flower, it will shrivel up and die. That's how such a notion affects our life. The Holy Scriptures are for us, the writings of the Fathers are for us, not simply for monks. They have their peace and quiet, they have their safe harbor, they have everything taken care of for them. We're the ones in the middle of the fight, in the middle of the storm, we're the ones pursued by the devil. And it is to us who Christ comes, in the midst of all our difficulties, to provide us with these spiritual weapons, which are called spiritual books. To us he says: "Study these things, and devote yourself to them" (1 Tim 4.15).

And we know everything! We know the names of dozens of actors and celebrities by heart, backwards and forwards. The same thing with soccer players and sports stars. Should we take a brief survey? Should I call on one of you? How many are here right now? I need only one of you. Here's a better idea, let's do something else. When you go home tonight, open up your church calendar. It has 365 days, although there are many more saints than that, there are thousands of them. Count and see how many of their lives you know. We said that they're our brothers and sisters, that we're all members of the same family. After that, open up your *Synekdemos* to the Great Canon which we chant during Lent. They're you'll find the names of just about everyone mentioned in the Bible. Look and see how many you recognize. I'm not sure this is a test we'll do very well on.

And why shouldn't we read? Don't tell me it's because you don't understand. That's a matter for the Holy Spirit. If you really want to

<sup>11</sup> A reference to "Marriage: The Great Sacrament", above, pp. 111-125.

understand, the Spirit will enlighten you. It is the Spirit who initiates and teaches the Church. Little by little, you'll learn the keys which open the secrets of these books, which open paradise. Or else you'll have someone special in your life, your spiritual father, who will be "initiated into these things by experience", as the Fathers say<sup>12</sup>. Soon you'll acquire your own experience, and you'll see that all things will be opened to you. But it takes work, study, and prayer.

Second, it requires desire, exile, interest and lack of interest. What does that mean? Can you fill up a glass that's already full? For divine meaning to enter your mind, for divine grace to enter into you, you have to empty your heart of its passions, of your self-centeredness, your selfishness, your hate, envy, and negative feelings; you have to purify your heart of these things, and fill it with virtues. The passions are like static. You turn on the radio to listen to a station, and all you hear is static. You don't understand a thing the announcer is saying. If you want to hear, you've got to eliminate the static. And how can you hear the voice of God, when the passions are booming away and growling loudly within you? You've got to free yourself, because if you don't, you'll remain a fleshly, carnal person, and a "carnal person cannot receive", does not understand, "the Spirit of God" (1 Cor 2.14)

Such static, moreover, can also be coming from outside. It can be caused by some problem or difficulty, that is, when you try to read in the midst of some problem, without trying to find a quiet moment. When you go swimming, you remove your clothes, or else they'll get soaked, become heavy, and you'll sink. In the same way, you need to remove all those things which fill up your life: distractions, desires, and all the clamorings of the world. Leave them all outside the door. Be solely with God for a few moments. You have all day to be caught up in those other things. During these moments, you should be alone with the only God<sup>13</sup>.

In this space which you've now created, in this place of indifference, in this place of the heart's abandonment of the world, in the space opened up by your distance from all things—precisely there you will find your desire for Christ. Let us be determined, let us make the decision, to understand all these things, because we are called to become saints. Like the blind man

<sup>12</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Life of Moses* (ed. H. Musurillo, GNO VII, 1 [Leiden: Brill, 1964], p. 121; cf. Abraham Malherbe, trans., *Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses* [New York, 1978], pp. 119-20).

<sup>13</sup> St. Isaac the Syrian, *Ascetical Homily 4* (ed. Theotokis, p. 96; cf. *Ascetical Homilies*, p. 29).

who cried out “Lord, I want to see you” (Mk 10.51; Lk 18.41), so you should cry out, too. Just like a hungry infant grabs its mother’s breast and takes milk, that’s how you should lay hold of your spiritual books.

Just like Zaccheus, who we heard about in this morning’s Gospel, we must climb up into the sycamore tree to see Christ (Lk 19.1-4). When you pick up your book, you should say to yourself: “This book has something to say to me”. And that is what you should seek to discover, and drink of it with all your heart, as a parched field soaks up rainwater.

There are many people in life like Zaccheus! I’ve read that in atheistic countries, where it is forbidden to read Holy Scripture, there are soldiers who, in order to elude their superiors, read the Gospel under their blankets with a flashlight. What desire, what longing! They’re putting their life at risk, and yet they do it anyway. This is an incredible thing! But alas there’s no need to look so far away, for right here in Trikala, there are households where children are forced to read the Gospel under the covers. And there are even some children—what has happened to us Christians?—children, I say, who are forced to read the Gospel ... in the bathroom! Their father or their mother keeps a close eye on them, and if they find spiritual books, they take them away and burn them. One tore a Gospel into pieces with his own hands—we’re talking about people who are baptized Christians! Should we say more? No. Better to keep silent about these things. Perhaps God will overlook, and spare us the punishment that we deserve.

Do we read the Gospel? Glory to God! When we read spiritual books, we should read them with openness of heart, with a sense of trust, in a spirit of heroism, as if we were saying: “O my Christ, I’m reading your book, and whatever you tell me, I’ll do it”. “Morning by morning God wakens my ear”, says the Prophet Isaiah, “and I hear him and obey. I am not rebellious” (Isa 50.4-5). That’s what it means to read a spiritual book.

Now that these conditions are in place, I mean first toil and prayer, and second desire, longing, heroism and decisiveness, we can turn to the results of spiritual study. But before we do so, I’d like to make a confession. When I began this series of sermons, I was afraid that the subject matter was not something you’d easily understand, and thus I hesitated. I thought I was tiring you. I see now, though, that your degree of participation indicates that you understand what I’ve been saying, because there is a thirst within your soul. I’ve also heard that you’ve been discussing these things outside of church, and are asking about how you can learn more. That shows how great your interest is, and that gives me special joy.

Let’s see, then, the results of spiritual study, without which there can be no spiritual life, and so that you can know what you should be looking for, when you open up a spiritual book. And if I have succeeded, either with this or with the preceding sermons, in lighting even a tiny spark in your heart, then I will be happy indeed.

When you feel the results of spiritual reading, you’ll say: “Blessed is the Name of the Lord!” (cf. Ps 112.2; Job 1.21). Truly, God bestows great gifts upon us! Do you know what power is hidden within the word of God? And spiritual study, spiritual books, are the word of God. It falls like a seed into our souls and bursts open sending forth its shoots. The word of God conceals within itself the power of God, the power of Christ. And when you immerse your mind and heart in a spiritual book, you will always be filled when you come forth from your reading. And the jar will never empty, but will always give, and give. Spiritual study will always open new horizons for you. It is the best set of tools you have in your home, a supply of weapons for the spiritual life.

What, then, do spiritual books give us? They give us, first of all, a foundation in God. The power of the word of God conquers our sins and defeats the devil, as St. John Chrysostom says<sup>14</sup>. The word of God, spiritual study, is like an instrument which punctures the hardness of our heart. It is like a charge of dynamite which blasts our passions to the left and to the right. It purges our heart and fills it with virtues. And this is what it means to have a foundation in God. We lay the foundation stones for the spiritual structure of our life. We acquire love for those around us, repentance, compunction, illumination. In studying spiritual books, we feel like Christ feels. We think like Christ thinks. We hear like Christ hears. We acquire the “mind of Christ” (Rom 11.34; 1 Cor 2.16), and feel him close to us. And if we’re sad, if we have some problem, if we’re upset, if a storm is passing through our life, you’ll see Christ and he’ll say to you: Wait, don’t be afraid, I am with you. And so, in the shelter of his wings, we’ll continue to move forward.

Afterwards, spiritual study gives us divine knowledge and desire for God. In reading such books, by the grace of God, you learn, you understand, you acquire divine knowledge. God becomes active and starts to work within you. You learn the teachings of our Faith. You learn who God is, what he did for you, and what you should do at every moment of your life.

<sup>14</sup> *Third Homily on Lazarus* 2, 3 (PG 48.993-94, 996).

The word of God is a sharp knife, the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6.17). It cuts out and removes all that is false and vain within us, and enthrones the truth in its place. And the truth sets us free (Jn 8.32). In this manner we enter into the light of truth, onto the road of eternal life. This is why it is said of Holy Scripture that: "It is your life" (Deut 32.46-47). Your true life is the Holy Scripture, along with every spiritual book.

This knowledge is a source of power which becomes active within us and gives us the love of Christ, divine love. In time, little by little, you feel a change within yourself, and the desire for Christ is imprinted in your heart like the stamp of a seal.

Just as the martyrs longed for Christ, and wanted to throw themselves into flames in order to be with him, so too will you feel the love of Christ being ignited within you. And if your desire is limited, you will be given greater zeal, because, as the Lord says, "to everyone who has, more will be given" (Mt 25.29). This is why a certain saint, when he was invited somewhere, said, "I'm not at leisure to come"<sup>15</sup>. Why not? Because he did not want to be deprived of his spiritual study, which was his means of acquiring divine knowledge and love.

All of the above leads us to the third element, namely, experiences of the divine. What are experiences? The things we live. When there's an earthquake, for example, I live the experience of stress and anxiety. The telephone rings, and it's my wife who's calling from far away. I'm coming home, she says, and at once I'm filled with joy, I live the experience of joy. Spiritual study gives us similar experiences. What does that mean? My dear friends, if you wish, forget all that I've told you up until now, but listen to this. If you forget everything else I've said, and remember only this, it will be enough. Spiritual books, and especially Holy Scripture, provide us with spiritual experiences. How? The spiritual book you read is the word of God, it is what God has said. If you're sitting there reading, and happen to hear a voice you recognize, you say: I know that person. The voice reveals the person. Where God's voice is, there is God, hidden within the voice. The spiritual book, in other words, is a mystery, a sacrament, a sign which conceals the presence of God himself.

This is why an ecclesiastical writer said once said that the words and lines of Holy Scripture are the garments of Christ. Just as I am covered by my clothing, so too do the pages of spiritual books cover Christ himself<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Sisoës, 27) (PG 65.401A).

<sup>16</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Lazarus* 3, 2 (PG 48.994).

I open the New Testament and I read: "The Epistle of Paul to the Romans". Is it Paul who speaks here? No. It is Christ who speaks. "The First Catholic Epistle of Peter". Is it Peter who speaks here? No. Here we find Christ, and it is he who speaks. Just as in Holy Communion, you see bread and wine, but when you receive it, you believe that, through the bread and wine, you're receiving Christ, you believe that Christ is present in it mystically. The same thing happens here. By means of letters and words, through the paragraphs and the pages, you commune mystically with Christ. But perhaps you'll tell me that you don't believe this. Perhaps you'll tell me it seems strange. But don't try to explain it. Can we explain the Faith? If we could, it wouldn't be spiritual. And don't forget that the Church is a place of miracles. Heaven and earth, body and soul, and human beings and angels and God, are all together here. All things are united in a single reality we call the Church. We are one with Christ. How then, in such a reality, is it possible for what I'm describing not to take place?

It follows, then, that when you're reading a spiritual book, Christ is present behind the lines. When you open such a book, it's like you're saying: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are present here". Seeking to understand the meaning of a passage is like saying: "Come, Lord Jesus" (cf. Rev 22.20); come, my Christ, come into my heart. Thus, when I study a spiritual book, and especially the Holy Scripture, it means that I commune with Christ.

The same Christ who once went about teaching in a corner of Palestine, is now mystically present with you. And I emphasize that "mystically present" means truly present. Because Christ is present behind every line of every spiritual book, it's as if he's calling you and saying: "Come, my child". And if you have the desire to understand what he's telling you, you'll respond and say: "I'm coming, Lord. And you come too, come to me, Lord". And thus we have a dialogue between two persons, face to face. Christ and I are conversing by means of the book. You don't see him? Neither do you see the person on the other end of the telephone, and yet the two of you speak to each other.

The reading of a spiritual book is a revelation, a theophany. It is the presence of Christ. It is an encounter with Christ, a mystical union with Christ. Christ and I are united. And Christ, moreover, is never without his spiritual army. At the head of an army you see the general, followed by all his soldiers. In the same way, Christ is always in the company of his



saints and his angels. This means that your union with Christ is also a mystical union with all the saints. If you have spiritual eyes and spiritual senses, you'll feel what such a union with Christ means. When we have the word of God in our heart, and in our mouth, we'll feel what a saint once said: "Though we live on earth, we celebrate a feast in heaven"<sup>17</sup>.

Now I understand my childhood friend, who used to read the Holy Scripture while kneeling in front of the icon screen. And I knew someone else who never read it without tears in his eyes, and a chant on his lips. They understood more than the rest of us.

I want you to live like St. Seraphim of Sarov, who, every week, read the entire Gospel<sup>18</sup>. Toward the end of his life, the saint knew that he had celebrated his final New Year's Day. In the early weeks of January, he made haste to go and meet his Lord and his God. He directed his disciples to make ready for the journey. The saint awaited Christ like the wise virgins (Mt 25.1-13). He lit his lamps in order to show Christ that he was waiting for him. He sat up and waited all night, as was his habit. He never slept at night.

At dawn, a monk who was passing by noticed smoke coming from the saint's cell. He knocked on the door. He knocked again. No answer. Pushing the door open, he entered the cell and looked around. There was St. Seraphim, kneeling at prayer with his eyes closed. The monk tapped the saint's shoulder, but there was no response. His soul had taken flight. Another monk had seen in a vision the saint's soul being escorted to heaven by angels. In front of the saint was an open Gospel book, the pages of which had been scorched by the lamp. All around him were his spiritual books, and these two were beginning to burn. They had just caught fire the moment the saint fell asleep, the moment he died. Did he die? No. He was born into the other life. The monks put out the fire, but the image endures, and can never be extinguished.

My beloved friends, we too should live like this, with our hearts longing for Christ, and with our lamps lit, and our spiritual books open before us.

<sup>17</sup> *Life of St. Pachomios* 131 (ed. F. Halkin, p. 83, line 8).

<sup>18</sup> Justin Popovitch, *Life of St. Seraphim of Sarov* (Thessaloniki, 1985), p. 42.

## SPIRITUAL LIFE\*

A few days ago, we celebrated New Year's Day. A new year has begun. My hope is that, with the dawning of this new beginning, your homes will become like those "built upon the rock" (Mt 7.24-25). My hope is that all of you, "redeeming the time" which God has given you (cf. Eph 5.16; Col 4.5), will attain success in your struggle to lead a spiritual life, to become spiritual people. Your path is a spiritual one. May you live a true, spiritual life.

God has deemed us worthy to see the dawn of yet another year. It is estimated that last year some forty-six million people died. We were found worthy to live. It is a gift, an opportunity given to us by God for success, not in the new year, but in the new life to which we have been called. What are the distinguishing marks and features of this new life? Some people laugh at us, and some praise us. Some say that Christians are sensible people, while others say we're mad. And whereas we struggle to lead a Christian life, to become candles shining in Christ, others live their lives without ideals, devoid of spiritual vision, concerned only with minor and vain things. And yet sometimes we envy such people. How strange! Those who are called to heaven, who have been chosen to live with the angels, archangels, and saints, are envious of those who are bound to the earth! But this is not how we should be. As for them, let them roll around in their lies.

A French philosopher was once asked what he thought about his life. He replied that he thought nothing of it. Then they asked him:

"Have you ever thought about heaven? About God?"

"No, never", he replied.

But yet, look at what this man, who gave no thought either to God or his own life, was actually concerned with. Again he was asked:

"Do you have difficult moments in life, worries, problems, moments when you are gripped by fear?"

\* A Sermon delivered in the church of St. Nicholas, Trikala, Greece, 10 January, 1971.

"Yes—there are many things which produce psychological anxiety in me", the philosopher said, "and at those moments, I seek consolation in my frogs".

The philosopher disdained to look at God. He was concerned however with his pet frogs, which he bred to console himself during the difficult moments of his life. Poor French philosopher! The day will come when, together with your German colleague, you will say: I am weary of all this. What has been the point of all my longing and sighing? He was then an old man of seventy-five, and still living in sin. And when you die, you will, like that other philosopher, ask for: Light, more light. But the light came into the world, and you didn't accept it (cf. Jn 3.19).

Sometimes we are dazzled by worldly people, but we forget that all their marvelous palaces are built on sand, and that, one day, they will watch them collapse into a heap of dust (cf. Mt 7.26-27). If we need to approach them, let it be during their moments of honesty, when they can open their hearts to us. Then we will see that their eyes are filled with tears, and filled with the things of the world; we will see their hearts plunged into despair and choking on their empty satiety. It is then that you will hear what their tired lips are whispering: "Tell me, where can I find oblivion in this heartless world?" They are dead souls, even if they are still alive. Souls without ideals, without any striving for a higher spiritual life—that's the only way they can be described: dead souls.

For those of us, on the other hand, who want to be living hearts, on fire with higher ideals, what are the principles that should govern our spiritual life? First and foremost, for us to be spiritual people, for our lives to be true, we must live a sacramental and mystical way of life. What does a sacramental and mystical way of life mean? Was any of us born of his own accord? No. All of us received the gift of life from our father and our mother. In the same way, no one acquires the gift of the spiritual life by his own efforts, try though he may. No matter how much I stretch myself, I'm not going to get any taller, however much I struggle. In the same way, I'm not going to create a spiritual life for myself. Even if I exhaust myself trying, if I toil, and weep, or undertake long fasts, the spiritual life is a gift granted to me by the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph 2.8-10)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See, also, St. Andrew of Crete, *Sermon on the Publican and the Pharisee* (PG 97.1261AC).

It follows, then, that a basic condition for the spiritual life is that we should understand that, on our own, we can do absolutely nothing. No matter how hard we try, the spiritual life is something that someone else gives to us. And this "someone else" is the Spirit of God, the Comforter, the "treasury of good things and the giver of life", the treasury from which all the riches of spirituality come forth, the source from which the spiritual life emerges and overflows. Of course, sometimes we get confused, and think that to be spiritual means to be a "good person": not to steal, not to kill, not to go to bad places or with bad friends, to go to church on Sunday, to be there for the Doxology, or at least in time to hear "Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", to read spiritual books, and so on.

But no, this is not the spiritual life. A spiritual person, a true Christian, is someone whose entire life is sworn to God. Initially, by means of his baptism, and later, in his heart, such a person swears an oath to God, to live for God, and to remain with God forever<sup>2</sup>. A spiritual person is an athlete who has burst into life, who stands out from the crowds of human beings, and runs with all the speed of his soul to heaven. A spiritual person is one who, with shining eyes and chest thrust forward, has set his course and races to heaven. He is not a "good man". A spiritual person knows that, in order to succeed, he needs strong wings: the wings of the Holy Spirit.

A spiritual person must therefore do everything possible to attract, to win over, the Spirit of God, because only the Holy Spirit, God himself, has the gifts of the spiritual life. According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, whose feast we celebrate today, the "distribution of the royal gifts" of the Holy Spirit takes place in the Church through the sacraments<sup>3</sup>.

The first sacrament is baptism, followed by chrismation. After this, there is confession, a sacrament which cleanses our hearts from sins and places us before someone who guides us to heaven: without him we can do nothing. After this is Holy Communion. Just as when the Holy Spirit overshadowed the All-Holy Virgin (cf. Lk 1.35), and the Word of God descended and was made flesh in her womb, so too does the Spirit come into our soul—so that Christ might be born within us, so

<sup>2</sup> A reference to the oath, taken at Baptism, to renounce Satan and join Christ.

<sup>3</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, *To those who Delayed their Baptism* (PG 46.417B).

that we may become personally acquainted with, and make the Holy Spirit our own; so that the life of Christ can become our life. And this is precisely what happens in the sacraments, beginning with baptism and chrismation. Without these, there is no Christian life. Whatever you do, even if you give your entire life to the poor, you are not going to be saved without baptism and chrismation.

As we receive Christ in baptism and chrismation, so too in Holy Communion. That tiny morsel you receive, which you put into your mouth and barely feel, is the whole Christ, the whole Trinity, together with the Church of Christ, and all the saints. This is Holy Communion. You have a bowl full of flour, you add a little yeast to it, and all the flour is leavened (cf. Gal 5.9). You receive a little morsel of Holy Communion, and you are immediately leavened; although you are a human being, you become what the Holy Communion is: God! And this is why the early Christians partook of it every day (cf. Acts 2.46). And we receive Communion every fifteen or twenty days and then think that we've done our duty, that we're fine, indeed, that we've gone above and beyond our duty! But they received Communion every day, because they knew what it was.

We can say, then, that a sacramental way of life means sacramental union with Christ, participation in the life of the Church by means of the mysteries.

We have also used another expression: mystical experience, mystical union with Christ. What does mystical union mean? Oh, my dear friends, listen to me carefully now, give me a little more of your attention, and you will see, when we've finished, how well you understand it—and when you try it, you'll feel so much joy that you'll be grateful I told you. Listen to me. Try it and you'll see how easy it is to be united with Christ every day, every hour, and every moment: you and Christ.

You've seen what happens with little children, innocent, unscathed children, when you put something before them that they like: they immediately open their eyes wide like the blue sky, they open their hands and clap them together, and jump up and down in their delight. This is what you will do when you sense the sweetness of mystical union with Christ, when you see and feel how easy it is to be mystically united with God. When you try it, you'll remember what I've said. Your heart will be flooded with feelings of joy, and you too will cry out with St. Syme-

on the New Theologian: "Tell me, you futile men, if you understand this: what person, having gained Christ, needs any of the good things from this world?"<sup>4</sup> Tell me, you men of futility, who live in lies, if you know of anyone who has put Christ in his heart, and still wants anything at all from what can be found on earth or in heaven.

What, then, is mystical union with Christ? How does it happen? But I'm afraid I may have already tired you, and so permit me to give you a little rest by sharing with you a story about St. Symeon the New Theologian. He is a great saint of our Church, and he writes about what he saw, what he experienced, how he rejoiced, how he enjoyed Christ in his life. Some of you, though, may wonder: Is all this true? But we can ask the same question regarding everything that's said about Russian and American satellites. Perhaps the things written about Napoleon are untrue, or about Alexander the Great, or about other figures from history. And who knows even if I exist or you exist? Perhaps this too is untrue. But the sole reality is what the saints say. Come and take a look at this reality, as St. Symeon presents it to us. I'll read you only brief passages.

"On one of the days when I was walking to the spring, you met me on the road, my Christ, you who had previously cleansed me from every sin. And then, before my weak eyes, you shone with a divine brightness, and I realized at once that the light I had previously seen was not the true light. But how was it possible for me to see you and know you? I saw you, I was perplexed, I marveled, but I still did not know that it was you. I simply marveled at you. I said: Who can this be, so bright, brighter than the sun? And then you went away. And one day, after a time, you returned, and after that you appeared to me often, and covered me with your divine light. But again you would go away and leave me in pain".

"I always had with me a helper, your disciple, your apostle"—he means his Elder, his spiritual father—"whom I honored as if I were honoring you, whom I loved with my soul, and at whose feet I would fall, and ask him to help me to know you better. And, while I was walking on the road one day, you presented yourself to me again. I began to suspect that it was you, but at that moment you swept me up into heaven, as the Apostle Paul says, 'fourteen years ago,' I was caught up into

<sup>4</sup> St. Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymn* 19 (ed. Johannes Koder, SC 174 [Paris: Cerf, 1971], p. 98, lines 50-52).

the heavens. In the body? In the soul? I don't know (cf. 2 Cor 12.2), you alone know".

"Some time later, you deigned to present yourself to me yet again. Your face was like the sun. This time you enlightened my understanding, and opened the eyes of my soul. And seeing you, I said: Who are you, whom I see and marvel at? And then, O my Christ, my Lord, then, for the first time, you granted me—me, the prodigal—to hear your sweet voice. And you spoke to me so sweetly, so calmly, that you left me in a state of ecstasy, and I was filled with wonder and trembled and thought: What glory is this, for me to see God! From that time on, I have not ceased to thank you!"

"And another time, when I was about to kiss the icon of your holy Mother, as I knelt to venerate it, before I could get up, you appeared first before me and then in my heart. And then I realized that you had united yourself with me. From then on, I loved you more, not only with my mind, but with all my heart. Since then, we have never been apart"<sup>5</sup>.

Do you see how this saint of our Church saw Christ, and was united with him? Do you see the heights which the saints attain? But how do they do this? What do they do to arrive at such greatness? In the first place, they are perfectly indifferent to things in the world. Nothing interests them. When some urgent business compels you to drive somewhere quickly, you don't inspect the car to see if it's new, or what sort of incidental features it has, but what concerns you is getting to your destination. So it is with the saints, who never deviate from their purpose. They are attached to nothing in the world. They love nothing in the world. They await only Christ. And he purifies them: he purifies their heart. Then, as St. Symeon told us, he illumines their souls and grants them the vision of God. God appears before their very eyes. What does the Gospel say? "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5.8). The saints see God.

After purification and illumination, God grants them freedom from passions. No rage or anger or envy or distress or worry or indignation! No passion whatsoever! Freedom! And as their soul becomes radiant, it becomes a vessel fit to contain God. And then Christ enters within them and they are mystically united. When this mystical union

takes place, when the saint has seen Christ, when he has rejoiced in him, understood him, come to know him, enjoyed him, then he is filled with divine love. But perhaps you will say to me: Haven't we also felt these things? Don't we love Christ? Don't worry. We love him too, but compared to the ocean of their love, ours is but a tiny drop.

The saints are heavenly human beings. Have you ever seen something which has caught fire and is burning in its entirety? That is what their life is like. They communicate with Christ and are united with him in different ways, but especially through unceasing prayer. "My Christ", they say to him constantly, "come into my heart—my Lord, my Jesus, my Christ—come and dwell in me". And Christ comes and dwells mystically in their hearts. That shouldn't surprise us. When you call someone, don't they come to you? Will Christ then not come when you call him? When you speak to someone, don't they hear you? Won't then God hear you, who said, "whatever you ask of me I will give you" (Mt 21.22). "Come and dwell in us", the saint says. He says it with his lips, he says it with his mind, he says it with his heart, and thus heart and mind are united with Christ. Then he feels that Christ is speaking to him, making his life sweet, his day joyful, and his nights unforgettable.

And we, what should we do? We all know how wearisome our life is, burdened with a thousand worries. But seeing what the saints of our Church have done, let us at least do the few small things of which we are capable. Christ accepts the hundred, the thirty, and the five which you will give him. If you can't remember him a thousand, or a hundred, or fifty times a day, say to him with love: O my Christ! Don't make requests about your job, about your mother, about your illness, about success. No. Ask him to enter your heart. Can you do this ten times a day? Five times? If you feel it, and you call upon him even twice a day, after a month you will be sweetened, and you will seek him ten times, then twenty times, and then you will begin to feel him in your heart.

To sum up: the first element of the spiritual life is sacramental and mystical experience of Christ. Through the sacraments, and by our efforts to call upon him mystically, we are united to Christ.

Let us now consider the second element of the spiritual life, namely, the spirit of martyrdom. Does this mean that our life should be a martyrdom, with tears, misery, and with those around us mocking us? Not in the slightest. Christian life is a song of joy. Christian life is a cel-

<sup>5</sup> Id., *Discourse 36* (ed. Basil Krivocheine, SC 113 [Paris: Cerf, 1965], p. 340).

ebriation. But it is also a life of heroism. The life of worldly people may have its joys, but how much bitterness, too!

I remember the poet who, when he was young, wrote to one of his classmates:

My friend, it's as if my heart's grown old.  
 .....  
 I'll go to the tavern, to ask again for the  
 Samian wine we drank together ...  
 and I will drink and get drunk.  
 .....  
 Round about will be the beautifully broad horizon,  
 But my song will be like weeping.  
 Because it won't contain the blue heaven  
 Which gives beauty to life.  
 Our eyes will be damp, and we'll have  
 Hades in our heart.<sup>6</sup>

His eyes will be filled with tears, and, in his heart—poor poet!—he will have Hades. But we Christians have heaven.

A life of martyrdom is a happy life, but also a heroic one. There was once a young child who lived during the time of the persecutions. He was happy. His life was like a song. And then one day his pagan father said to him:

"My child, what is the best, the finest gift I can give you?"

"The finest gift? Father, I'm a Christian! The finest gift for me would be to die for Christ".

"You're a Christian?" asked his father in alarm.

"Yes, to die for Christ would be the finest gift."<sup>7</sup>

Christians are not cowards, for they are not lovers of the flesh. They know how to live. They also know how to die for Christ. This is how the saints of our Church lived and continue to live. This spirit of martyrdom is evident in asceticism, which is a voluntary acceptance of toil and pain. Most ascetics, having loved Christ from their youth,

<sup>6</sup> K.G. Karyotakis, *Collected Works* (Athens, 1965), vol. 1, pp. 49, 14.

<sup>7</sup> The child is St. Tarsisius, a third-century saint, whose feast day is celebrated in the West on August 15th.

sought to sacrifice themselves, and give their life to God, for whom their soul was yearning. Often they shut themselves up within caves, without eating or drinking. They left such places infrequently, only to go to church, and, after that, to take some nourishment. Saints Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian, for instance, lived in a small, remote hermitage, frequented by no one, except for an occasional hunter. They lived with deprivations, with thirst, without food, in dampness, without light, until they were nearly paralyzed, after which they were taken from there by Basil's mother<sup>8</sup>.

Others slept for only a few hours. For most of his life, St. John Chrysostom slept only three hours out of the twenty-four, standing, supported by a rope<sup>9</sup>. Others, such as the emperor Theodosios II, who became a saint, wore hair-shirts under their garments, in order to chasten and subdue their bodies<sup>10</sup>. Others placed chains about themselves. Others ... how many should one cite?

Today, such things may seem to be simply legends, or misinterpretations of the spirit of the Gospel. But don't you think they give witness to an obvious heroism, an enviable greatness, a hidden depth, a height inconceivable? By means of these things, the saints transcended nature, they conquered the passions, they eliminated sinful impulses, they trampled on the devil, they acquired ardent love, they gained inner freedom, and by their angelic way of life, they became shining lights to all mankind and to all generations<sup>11</sup>.

These are the things that were done by these saints, who had such magnificent hearts. But what about us? What must we do to have such a spirit of martyrdom? Where, in what aspects of our life, are we to show forth our heroism? First and foremost, when we are confronted by life's sorrows, by pain, by obstacles, failures, and by all the tempests of life. Life is filled with pain and sorrow. They are everywhere. And all of us face difficult moments, when we are tempted to say that God is to blame, or that he's forgotten me—and who knows? Maybe there is no God; but if God does exist, he is cruel. Why does he torment me like

<sup>8</sup> Gregory the Theologian, *Letter* 4, 5 (PG 37.28A-29B).

<sup>9</sup> *Life of St. John Chrysostom* 4 (PG 114.1061D).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Glykas, *Chronicle* 4 (PG 158.489C).

<sup>11</sup> "The monastic life is a light to all men", St. John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 26 (PG 88.1020D).



this, while unbelievers rejoice? And so on. But in these difficult moments, let us say: "Glory to you, O God". With these words, you show that you are a martyr for Christ, that you accept with joy the pain that you encounter.

Second, you show your heroism when you understand that the Christian life requires a struggle, and that great sacrifices are necessary in order to cut off the impulses of your passions, your weaknesses, and your sins. To cut out sin, much toil is needed.

When we began our Christian life, we were full of enthusiasm. Without it, we would have been like an engine without steam, or a run-down clock, and in the end gotten nowhere. But we had our enthusiasm, we had our spiritual father, we had the writings of the Fathers, we were helped by the grace of God, and so we made some progress. But slowly, little by little, the difficulties set in, the failures, the compromises, the sins, the temptations, thoughts of stopping, of turning back. Our life, which till then had been like a happy song, became a cross. But it is then, my dear friend, that your martyrdom begins. When your Christian life begins to be difficult, when it seems like an intolerable cross, then you must stand as steady as a rock. That is when you are a martyr. Say to yourself: "Let us stand aright"<sup>12</sup>. Stand fast, steady and unmoving. Say, like the prophet, "Here I am, O Lord, I stand here ready to do your will" (Isa 6.8). Be like the Theotokos, who said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to your will" (Lk 1.38). If you endure, the storm will pass, and you will emerge into the calm; your life will once again become a celebration, a feast day. But now you will have the experience of spiritual struggle, you will have acquired experience. After this trial, after having taken up your cross, the flames of divine love will be ignited within you, and you will acquire the most beautiful, the most powerful, the purest, most angelic love, the love of God.

Third, be a martyr in the struggle against your doubts, your hesitations, your imaginings, and your sinful thoughts. As you're sitting there, a thought may enter your head: What if there is no God? What if everything is a lie, as empty as the air? What if there is no such thing as the soul? What if Christianity is wrong? What if I'm stupid? At such times, take up the cross of your doubts and thoughts. Someone who

<sup>12</sup> I.e., the deacon's call to the people, before the anaphora of the Divine Liturgy.

had doubts about God, but who never gave up his struggle for faith, said, "My God, if you exist, send me your Holy Spirit!" And God answered and sent him the Holy Spirit. He opened his heart, and latter called him to the office of bishop.

Fourth, show your martyr's spirit in the daily arena of your life, in your home, with your husband, with your wife. When your husband comes home tired from work, and speaks to you without being polite, don't get angry. If he swears at you, don't answer him back. Show him love, tolerance, patience. If your wife has burnt the food, don't shout at her; eat it. Put a little lemon juice on it to make it more tasty, and tell her it's fine. Let love reign in your house. When you see that your spouse has wronged you, don't start shouting about how much you're in the right. It doesn't matter whether you're in the right or not. It doesn't matter what is correct, but what the other person wants. Get out of the way. Deny yourself. Put the other person first. This is death, this is martyrdom.

Once, when I was in a hurry to come here from the monastery to speak to you, I took a taxi, so I wouldn't be late. On the way, I asked the driver:

"Tell me, do you ever get to eat lunch or dinner with your wife?"

You know what sort of work these drivers have, and how they almost never know when they're going to be home.

"Every day", he told me, "both lunch and dinner".

"How do you manage it? What time do you eat?"

"Lunch starts from 10:00 in the morning, and goes till 4:00 in the afternoon, and dinner is from 6:00 in the evening till 2:00 in the morning".

Do you understand? At 10:00 in the morning, his wife had the meal ready and waited for him, whatever time he arrived, so that they could eat together. And in the evening, she waited for him from 6:00, often till 2:00 in the morning. Doesn't that impress you? This is what martyrdom in life means: a life of love.

Fifth, in our social interactions, we should likewise be people who deny themselves. We should give ourselves to others, and not be like the man who said: "I have lived for myself, I have thought of myself; for myself, and not for anyone else"—as if Christ had never lived, as if he had never died!

Oh, my dear friends, all the people around you, in your home and outside it as well, need you. There is a terrible curse in our life, which af-

flicts many people, the curse of loneliness. You remember that woman who killed herself at the age of seventy because, she said, there had never been anyone in her life who loved her. Many people live shut away in their loneliness, and often there is no one to show them a little love.

An author once wrote about a young man in an office, who had never had anyone close to him, to take an interest in him, and show him a little love, so that he might open his heart. It started to snow. He went to the window and looked at the snow, to lighten his heavy heart somewhat. But it didn't lighten. In the evening, he closed the office, went out and leaned up against a door to rest a little. It was night-time, and his heart was heavy, crushed. There was no one that day to show him a little love. But at that moment, there was someone! It was a man with a pipe in his mouth, a walking-stick in his hand, and a fedora on his head. A snowman! He hadn't found another soul to talk to, and so he opened his heart to him!

Everyone around us, poor and rich, small and great, needs us. Let our life be characterized by loving care, tenderness, and compassion. Let us live close to others, and for others. As one of the ascetics says, "our foundation is our neighbor"<sup>13</sup>, which means that the criterion of our spiritual life is found in those around us. We should love others, not out of any presumed "goodness", but out of a sense of responsibility which we have towards them.

Finally, sixth, let us be ready, if necessary, to shed our blood for Christ and for our fellow man. Let us be ready to sacrifice ourselves. At the very least, we must deny ourselves something, give something up for him. We must suffer, we must embrace suffering for Christ. Without this, our life will be a truncated life.

We come now to the third and last aspect of the spiritual life, which is to seek after for Christ. I wonder: has the fire been ignited within us? Even though we have all been baptized, and chosen Christ; even though we've made a beginning with respect to our spiritual life, do we continue nevertheless to be carnal, and thus leave our future to a game of chance? The spiritual life should be marked by the intensity of its seeking for Christ. We must constantly think of him and seek him, and then we will know joy. As the Psalmist says, "I remembered the Lord and was glad" (Ps

76.4). "Seek me and you will find me", says the Lord (Mt 7.7; Lk 11.9). If we seek him, we will find him, and our life will be filled with gladness.

Many things in our life hide Christ from our view, and we are distracted and absorbed by many concerns, and thus we are not able to have him before us constantly. And even the best things in our life can become obstacles: your job, your home, your children, your husband, your wife—everything. Conditions are difficult. But the spiritual life is a battle in which we must never take our eyes off God. We must always seek out our leader.

I remember once, when I had gone to the Holy Mountain, in a spot thickly planted with trees, I saw in the distance an ascetic who was chanting as he walked along a path. And from time to time, while he chanted, he would stop, bow down, make a prostration, and then continue on his way. Who, I wondered, was he worshipping? I hurried through the trees, went up to him, and stopped him.

"Elder, who is that you are worshipping on the road?"

"But, my child, don't you see him?"

"Who?"

"Christ. At least, if you don't see him, surely you feel that he is standing in front of you?"

My dear friends, there was a time when people's eyes filled with tears, and their hearts burst into flame, whenever they uttered or heard the Name of Christ. They fell to their knees. And why do we, my God, why do we think so little of you; why are we so little moved by you? Why do we so rarely feel any desire for you? Because "where our treasure is, there will our heart be" (Mt 6.21; Lk 12.34). Do you want to know how much your life costs, how much it's worth? Its value is equal to your thirst for Christ; as much as your heart belongs to Christ, that's how much it's worth.

Remember, then, that you've taken an oath, a promise to remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life (cf. Rev 2.10). In this, you are like that king's son, who swore an oath on the Gospel to remain loyal to his father till the day he died. Years passed, the child grew up. One day, enemies came, seized the king, and imprisoned him in a far land. The son remained at liberty. If he had wanted, he could have become king. But he could not forget the oath which he had sworn to his father. I have sworn an oath, he said, and must remain true to it. And one day,

<sup>13</sup> *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (John Kolobos 39) (PG 65.217A).

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while it was still night, he took his horse, and passed through the enemy territory to find his father, to show him that he remained faithful to his oath. Along the way, while he was passing an inn, he slipped, fell from his horse, struck his head, and lost consciousness. Hearing the noise, the people came out, lifted him up, still unconscious, and took him in. As soon as he revived, he asked for some water, and, having bound his head with a towel, hastened to leave. Wait, they said to him, where are you going? Your head's bleeding, it's dangerous. But the king's son couldn't wait. He had sworn his oath and he had to honor it. He mounted a fresh horse—his own had been killed—he urged it on and left. He galloped along the road. The blood flowed. He hurried to his father. Covered in blood, wracked with pain. But he cried out: I have taken my oath and I belong to him. I will remain faithful unto death.

Let us remain faithful to our oath until death!



**Archimandrite Aimilianos** (1934–) is one of the most renowned elders of modern Greece. As Abbot of Simonopetra Monastery on Mount Athos and as the founder and spiritual father of the Holy Convent of the Annunciation in Ormylia, northern Greece, he has had a profound impact on the revitalization of Orthodox monasticism, which in turn has deepened the spiritual lives of Orthodox Christians throughout the world. Through his gifted preaching and words of counsel, drawn from his own experience of transformation in Christ, he has led countless souls on the path to union with God.

The works collected in the present volume reflect the importance which the Elder consistently attached to prayer, spirituality, community life, worship, and liturgy. The experientially based works "On Prayer" and "The Prayer of the Holy Mountain," which deal primarily with the Prayer of the Heart, appear first, followed by the addresses "The Divine Liturgy" and "Our Church Attendance." These are in turn followed by the more socially oriented discourses "Our Relations with Our Neighbor" and "Marriage: The Great Sacrament." Finally, this volume closes with the sermons "Spiritual Reading" and "The Spiritual Life," which in a simple and yet compelling manner set forth the conditions for "ascending to heaven on the wings of the Spirit." It is our hope that *The Church at Prayer* will serve as a ready aid and support for those who desire God and eternal life in Him.



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